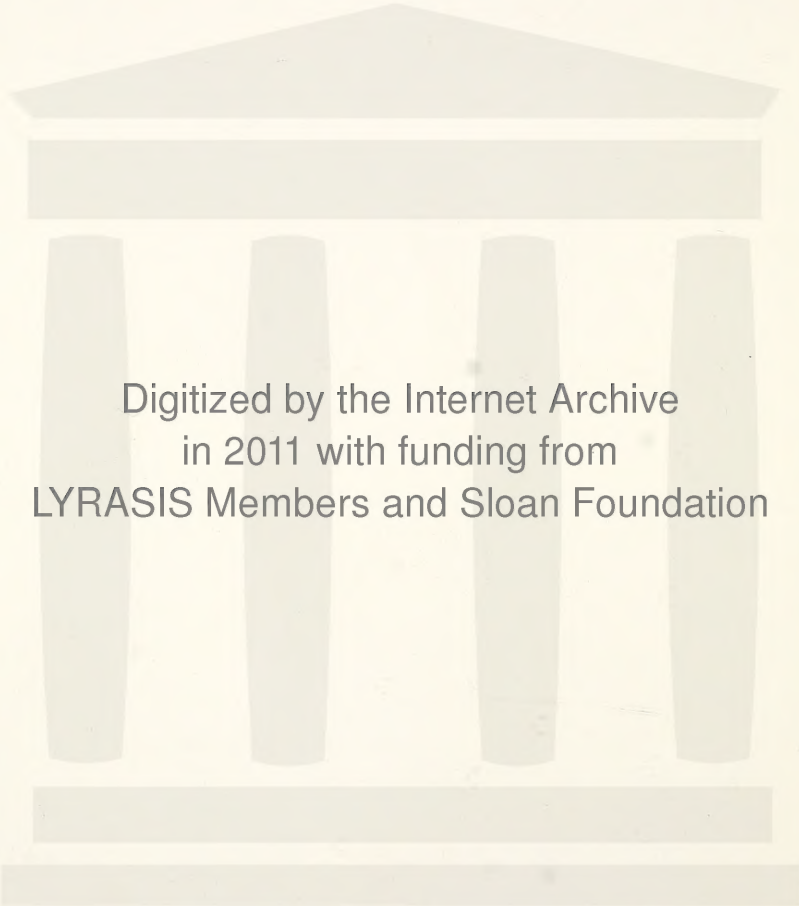


# *Spiritus Today*



*Cor unum  
et  
anima una*





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SPIRITANS  
TODAY  
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# THE FOUNDERS OF THE SPIRITANS

“TO HAVE THE SPIRIT OF A CONGREGATION,  
IT IS NECESSARY TO HAVE THE SPIRIT  
OF THE FOUNDER”.

François Libermann  
(N.D. 1, 385-1837)



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## FOREWORD

The fact that the Congregation is on the verge of a General Chapter decided us to give over this issue to our Spiritan founders: half to Fr Claude Francis Poullart des Places, half to Fr Francis Libermann, so that everyone may clearly see what unites them, and us in them.

Fr Joseph Michel, C.S.Sp., historian, whose work on Fr Poullart des Places is authoritative, wrote a recent article for the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*. He has drawn on that to make a historical rereading starting from new discoveries made in archives in Toulouse, which give glimpses of astonishing clarity about Poullart de Places's personality.

Fr Maurice Gobeil, C.S.Sp., Superior Provincial of Canada, deals with the spiritual aspect of his person and doctrine, in article of a deep insight.

Fr Bernard Tenailleau, C.S.Sp., treats of Fr Libermann's specific spirituality, starting from an original and loving analysis of his work, of which he knows all the ins and outs.

Fr Jean-Marie Tillard, O.P., whose publications on the theology of the religious life, on the Eucharist and on ecumenism are well known, is familiar with Libermannian thought, on which he has often lectured. He dilates here freely on the subject, addressing himself to Spiritans.

This issue is a homage to our two founders and an encouragement to give them their full and common position in the new text of our rules, which the forthcoming Chapter will confirm.

Alphonse GILBERT, C.S.Sp.  
Myles L. FAY, C.S.Sp.





## PREFACE

by Rev. Fr Frans Timmermans, Superior General

I am very happy indeed to offer you this fine portrait of our Founders, one that is well-known to us, but which is here presented in a different light which brings out details in a new way — with the result that we are able to understand even better our memories of them which have accumulated over the years.

These articles have been prepared to help us enter into the spirit of the General Chapter, which is now so near. They will be welcomed by many as a timely reminder: more than ever we need these witnesses who lived out and formulated their Call from God so simply and yet with such strength of purpose. Our first “Rule” is the expression of their inspired vision. Our Venerable Father tells us himself how, after dedicating his Work to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, he was able to write his first Rule straight off! How different it is with ourselves! Right in the middle of our long history and with the help of 3,600 brothers of widely different cultures and experiences, we are trying today to formulate for our own times the essential nature of our vocation! It is my wish that this particular work on our Founders, which brings out their cooperation with the grace so specially theirs, may help us all, and particularly the Capitulants, to retrace our steps to our origins.

Many of you have written to me in recent years expressing the desire that more recognition be given to our first Founder and to the initial spirit of the Congregation before Father Libermann. You say that it is by studying the entirety of our Spiritan sources and of our history that we shall be in a better position to “read the signs” concerning God’s will for us in the decisions we have to make both now and in the years ahead. You also insist that our two Founders be not put in opposition; that we can understand the richness of their respective charisms far better precisely through what is particular to each and through what makes them complementary the one to the other. This portrayal of our two Founders, which brings out the closeness of their spirituality and apostolic spirit is a reply to this request.

This highlighting of the common ground between Claude François Poulard des Places and Francis Mary Paul Libermann will also be of

great help to us in the better understanding of the key-elements of our own vocation: the important points of emphasis in our "Sequela Christi" and in our Apostolic journeys.

Since the 1968 Chapter we have been living constantly with internal tensions arising from the defining of "specific nature", from polarising our diverse traditions, from agonising over the meaning of "true" fidelity to our vocation. May we succeed in by-passing this dispute at the coming Chapter by placing it on a different level, namely at that at which our Founders placed it. They themselves were so open to the Holy Spirit, so empty of themselves, so full of the spirit of sacrifice that they were able to read and interpret the signs of their own times and in consequence to answer them too. Our own task in reformulating the Constitutions for the needs of today is exactly the same.

After reading these excellent articles I have had no hesitation in placing our General Chapter under the protection of our two Founders, asking them to watch over their heritage and to obtain for us the grace to remain faithful.

F. TIMMERMANS C.S.Sp.



# I - THE SOURCES OF POULLART DES PLACES'S SPIRITUALITY AND THE ORIGINS OF HIS WORK

by Joseph Michel, cssp.

*Poullart des Places is unique among founders of religious Societies. When they gave the Church the gift of a new religious family, the youngest of them was over thirty, and few are those who died before fifty. At 24, Poullart des Places, a simple tonsured cleric, founded a seminary for the poorest aspirants to the priesthood, called 'poor scholars'. He died at thirty, a priest for less than two years, leaving an institution marked by his spirit that would figure among the biggest religious congregations. Two Saints, Grignon de Montfort and John Baptist de la Salle, solicited his collaboration. 3,000 Daughters of the Holy Spirit, whose founder was one of his first followers, are his spiritual grand-daughters. 3,500 Spiritans look on themselves as his sons. It has become more possible recently to trace the origins of his work. This was not the working-out of a preconceived plan but the fruit of an intensely lived spirituality of both listening to the Holy Spirit and observing the greatest problem of the Church at that time, namely, clerical reform, the condition for evangelizing the poor.*

## THE VOCATION OF A RICH YOUNG MAN

Claude Francis Poullart des Places was born at Rennes in Brittany on 26 february 1679. He was first child and only son of Francis Claude, lawyer in the parliament, and of Jeanne Le Meneust de la Vieuxville. Before the reform of the Breton nobility in 1668, the Poullart family had enjoyed the rank of squire, and Francis Claude's greatest ambition was to attain nobility for his family. Claude's good-



living parents made him wear a white robe in honour of our Lady until he was seven. They entrusted him young to a good teacher, and at nine he began the six years of secondary studies at the Jesuit school in Rennes. Three years later he became friends with a neighbour, Louis Grignon, six years his senior, who was then studying philosophy. He did a last year of 'rhetoric' under Fr Longuemarre and another at Caen under the same man. He returned to Rennes bearing three prizes, including rhetoric. At the end of the next three years of philosophy he was chosen for the Great Occasion (le Grand Acte), arranged for 25 August 1698. The newspaper, **Mercure Gallant**, of November 1698, dedicated three pages to the affair of Claude's defending his thesis, which was dedicated to the Count of Toulouse, Louis XIV's son, governor of Brittany. It gave high praise to the young philosopher. '*If he was attacked, he defended himself still better; his solutions appeared nothing short of genius, and he propounded them with such grace that he drew the admiration of all*'. Claude was nineteen and a half. '*The leanings he had had from infancy towards the ecclesiastical state often returned*' (Thomas, p. 240). He asked his parents if he could go and study theology at the Sorbonne in Paris, but his father, seeing his life's dream dissolve, persuaded him to begin by doing law at Nantes. For the next three years he remained silent about his vocation. His father, who possessed a considerable fortune, was aiming at getting him into the ranks of the nobility by acquiring the post of king's secretary and making him a counsellor in the parliament.

In the first half of 1701, Claude '*withdrew from worldly affairs to pass a week in the solitude*' of a retreat. He drew up his '*Reflections on the Truths of Religion*' and debated on the choice of a state of life. He was living with his family without exercising any profession, but he was observant enough of his father's activities to note: '*My father is an old man, who will leave behind a good deal of business concerns which few people other than myself would be able to put in order*' (Writings, p. 45, in **Spiritan Papers**, no. 16, Rome 1983).

'Sometimes (I am) as devout as a hermit, pushing austerity beyond the limits becoming a person of the world; at other times soft, cowardly and lax in my Christian practice' (p. 43) — he is not at peace. 'In my present state I have everything to fear; my present state does not meet with your approval (O God)' (p. 36).

'I realize full well that you do not approve of my present life but have chosen something better for me' (p. 40).

'You try to convince me that you want to make use of me in the most hallowed religious posts' (p. 17).

If he followed his leaning towards the ecclesiastical state, it would be *'to convert souls to God'* (p. 45). His zeal expresses itself in three successive paragraphs of the *'Reflections'*:

**'I will make known to hearts that no longer know you...'**

**'I will proclaim (to sinners) what your divine goodness has given me to understand...'**

**'I will therefore invite them... to pray sincerely'** (pp. 25-25).

Claude inclines towards the priesthood, and also frequently feels his *'inclination towards the poor'*; he likes *'to give alms'* and *'naturally sympathizes with the misery of others'* (p. 43, 45, 51).

Finally he aims at 'genuine' holiness and sees in the Blessed Eucharist the most excellent means of obtaining the graces necessary to reach it. **'For the rest of my life I shall never fail to assist'** (p. 33) **at the sacrifice of the Mass. 'O my God, by offering you this spotless victim I will force you to give me back all the graces I need to become a genuine saint'** (p. 33).

He foresees that, on the road to holiness, *'the most formidable'* obstacle will be *'ambition'*, his *'ruling passion'* and he asks God to intervene: **'O my God... humble me, crush my pride and silence my vainglory. May I find mortifications et every turn. May people rebuke and despise me. I accept all this provided you continue to love me and that I continue to remain dear to you'** (p. 34).

By the end of his retreat on choosing a state of life, he knew that God was calling him to the priesthood. The Jesuit Father in whom he confided did more than confirm his conviction, he suggested an efficacious way of overcoming his ambition. Instead of doing theology at the Sorbonne, where he would sit for university degrees that would permit him to openings for high posts in the Church, why not do it at the College of Louis-le-Grand, where he would finish without licence or doctorate but with a more solid doctrine?

#### AT LOUIS-LE-GRAND THE INFLUENCE OF A PIOUS SECRET SOCIETY

Claude followed his consellor's suggestion. By October he was at Louis-le-Grand. Faithful to his retreat resolutions, he maintained, *'exteriorly and in his ways, a polished appearance by worldly stan-*

dards' (Thomas, p. 272). But profound changes were on the way. **The Life of Michel de Nobletz** (by Anthony Verjus, Paris 1666) was of great help to him 'to despise the world and rise above all human respect' (Besnard, p. 276). But the main thing was that he was accepted into the 'Assembly of Friends' or AA (*Assemblée des amis*), a secret pious association constituted of a small group of theology students who, at Louis-le-Grand as in most of the Jesuit colleges, put life into the Marian groups.

The AA set out to raise up an élite body of apostles, chosen not for birth or blood but for spiritual worth. The influence of this élite would work at reforming the clergy. Without secrecy it was impossible at that time, unless one failed gravely in manners, to refuse a nobleman who sought admission into an association. Its ambition of working at the reform of the clergy — many of whose members lived mediocre or bad lives — also precluded the assembly from publishing its aims and methods, under pain of incurring antipathies and persecutions (*Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, art. Secret Congregations, by R. Rouquette, t. 2, col. 1491-1507). This second motivation for the secret was much stronger in the 17th and 18th centuries than it would be after the French Revolution. And yet — as we have recently discovered — Libermann himself was a member of two associations, that of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary (St Sulpice) and that of the holy Apostles (Issy); these exacted of their members the most inviolable secrecy about their existence and activities.

Most of the archives of the AA are lost; those of Paris completely so or almost. Those of Toulouse, which are considerable, were purchased back by chance from a dealer in curiosities about 1919; they are preserved by the Jesuits at 22 Rue des Fleurs. The members in Toulouse had the custom of copying into registers all letters sent out or received. Thanks to those received from Paris, the activities of the AA at Louis-le-Grand can be followed. It happens, though rarely, that the name of a living member is given. Fr Rouquette, author of the best study on the AA, which appeared in 1969, did not recognize Poullart des Places. The following year Yves Poutet, who had come across our founder in the course of his researches on John Baptist de la Salle, recognized in an 'edifying note' of a letter from Paris 'an eminent member of the AA, whose secret had not yet been pierced, Claude Francis Poullart des Places' (*The 17th c. and the Origins of La Salle*, Rennes 1970, t. 2, p. 364).



## CLAUDE LIVED THE AA SPIRITUALITY WHOLEHEARTEDLY

The 'Friends' sought for holiness through mental prayer, frequent Confession and holy Communion, imitation of Christ and our Lady, poverty and simplicity of life, avoidance of honours and benefices, corporal mortification. Claude lived each of the points of this spirituality wholeheartedly. He consecrated more than two hours a day to mental prayer. He *'purified himself more and more frequently in the sacrament of Penance'* (Thomas p. 264). *'If he relented somewhat in his frightful mortifications, it was by express order of his director'* (Thomas p. 270). The rules of the AA invited clerics never to wear *'soutanes of fine cloth; if they were hemmed by a silk band, the band must be removed'*. Claude received tonsure on 15 August 1702 and *'he is seen immediately relinquishing the airs of the world in order to put on the habit and simplicity of the most reformed ecclesiastics'* (Thomas p. 272). He wrote: *'From partaking of Jesus' Body I drew the attachment that led me to despise the world and its ways. I cared little for its esteem and even tried sometimes to displease it by contravening its conventions'* (p. 68).

The apostolic zeal for the AA found outlet in teaching catechism to children of the parishes, in visiting hospitals and above all in contact with those around, each person trying to convert one or several of his fellow-students. It was also manifested by great care for the poor as suffering members of Christ and by a genuine preoccupation about the Christian masses, who, to overcome their religious ignorance, had need, not of idle and greedy incumbents, but of apostles according to the gospel, poor and disinterested. This apostolic zeal found inspiration in an annual cycle of meditations contained in the book of the AA (**Practice of Devotion and the Christian Virtues according to the Rules of the Congregations of Our Lady**, Paris 1654). Here are some extracts.

*Love for Jesus cannot be idle; it passes from the heart to the hands, from affection to action — otherwise it is not love* (p. 90).

*There is no greater proof of the love we have for God than that which we have for our neighbour, who, by a glorious substitution of the dying Jesus, has taken his place on earth in order to be the nearest and most immediate object of our affections* (p. 92). . .

*And as among our brothers the most destitute are the dearest to our father and good mother, it is they also who will be the objects of our affection: the poor, the sick, the afflicted, to whom I would add the sinners (p. 93).*

*The worst of are the sinners who are outside God's grace. These are to be regarded with most compassion and comforted with most care. How powerful a motive is the example of Jesus, who, by his birth, life, death, thoughts, desires, prayers, tears, sweat and blood looked only to the salvation of sinners. So let us work seriously, after Jesus' example, for their conversion and salvation, remembering that we are children of a mother who is refuge and home of sinners (p. 95-96).*

Periodically the 'substitute' or secretary of an AA told other groups about edifying facts of the prayer or apostolic life of their confreres. The '*edifying notes*', which constitute the essential of these exchanges by letter, are anonymous. They were given, once or twice a year, to the Jesuit director of the group, who, to insure anonymity, recopied them, modifying them a little sometimes, before giving them to the secretary. Between 1701 and 1709 a single letter, dated 17 March 1703, was sent from Paris to the AA's in the country. Two edifying notes, one of 1702 the other of 1703, incontestably concern Poullart des Places. The first reads:

**Another (confrere) pays the upkeep and lodgings of a poor scholar, he buys old clothes to clothe other poor people; the same confrere makes eight visits to the Blessed Sacrament daily and receives holy Communion three times a week; he often visits the hospitals; twice a week he gives instruction to twenty poor chimneysweeps and also helps them materially; he charitably admonishes the confreres who neglect their duties; he drinks only water and eats very little, never what is to his own taste (*Letters of AA*, t. 1, folio 208; S.J. Archives, Toulouse CA 101).**

To follow the development of our founder and grasp the origins of his work, we possess his own writings, the 'memoir' of Pierre Thomas, the biography of Grignon de Montfort by Fr Besnard and a letter of J. B. Faulconnier. This letter confirms, specifies, completes and clarifies what we knew already. Claude, from 1702 on, evinces a particular attraction for the most obscure and abandoned works (Thomas p. 268). He teaches catechism twice a week to twenty chimneysweeps, whom he also helps materially. He often visits the hospitals. He pays the

upkeep and lodgings of J. B. Faulconnier, a poor scholar of about 16 years of age, whom he sends here and there to bring old clothes to embarrassed poor people. Of what the college furnishes for his food, he takes off the best and sends it to sick and poor people. He treats himself less well than the least of them. Faulconnier saw him eating stewed beans so old that they were covered in greenmould to a depth of two fingers! (Thomas p. 268; Faulconnier in Michel p. 99)!

### THE FOUNDATION OF HOLY GHOST SEMINARY

After undertaking the care of Faulconnier, Claude turned to other poor scholars who lodged in the town in conditions equally unfavourable to their studies and their virtue. At first he only saw an exercise of charity in this apostolate. The foreign missions, he thought, was his vocation, where his ambition was to die a martyr (Writings p. 67). Yet his zeal soon drove him to multiply his activity in favour of sinners, *'the most wretched'* of all the poor. *He realized that in order to succeed he could do no better than continue to aid poor scholars to subsist, and give them the opportunity to pursue their studies. He conceived the plan of gathering them into a room where he would go from time to time to give them instruction and watch over them as far as his living in the college allowed him* (Besnard p. 282). There was still only question of four or five poor scholars (Writings p. 148). Given approval by his director, encouraged by the promise of the college principal to accord him a part of the boarders' rations, he hired a spot near Louis-le-Grand.

That was how things were when Grignion de Montfort, during the summer of 1702, came to see him and invited him to join forces with himself in order to be the foundation of the Company of Mary. After making clear to his friend what he considered his present real vocation, Claude made him this promise: *'If God gives me the grace to succeed, you can count on having missionaries; I will prepare them for you and you will put them to work'* (Besnard p. 282).

His project went ahead rapidly. In his letter of 17 March 1703, the secretary of the AA in Paris recopied the note that the Fr Director had given him:



Another (confrere) has left a benefice of 4,000 pounds and a position of councillor in parliament that his parents wanted to give him in order to become director of a seminary, where he will experience only troubles and fatigue. The same person only sleeps daily three hours on a chair, and spends the rest of his time in prayer. The same, for reasons of mortification, never eats but one kind of meat and drinks only water; the same gives large alms, never less than a 'half-louis'.

The principal interest of this text is that it shows us for certain that at the beginning of Lent 1703 Poullart des Places, director of a seminary, already lived at Gros Chapelet, Rue des Cordiers, in the midst of his poor scholars. He waited until 27 May, the feast of Pentecost, to consecrate his work to the Holy Spirit under the invocation of the Blessed Virgin, conceived without sin. The little community of Rue des Cordiers grew rapidly. All the rooms at Gros Chapelet were occupied and it soon spread to the neighbouring house, the famous White Rose, which, in the middle of the previous century, had been the cradle of the first Parisian AA, which in turn played a part in the origins of the Seminary of the Paris Foreign Missions.

At the beginning of 1704, after eighteen months of a very pronounced state of affective prayer, 'M. Desplaces' (as Claude spelt his name in Paris) underwent a painful spiritual trial that was to last a whole year. In his 'Reflections on the Past', drawn up in the course of a retreat during the Christmas vacation, he drew a graphic contrast between his past fervour and the present dryness of his soul, which he takes for tepidity. He realizes that he cannot govern a fast-growing community alone while pursuing his studies simultaneously. So he called on Michel-Vincent Le Barbier, a lifelong friend, and a priest since September, to come to his assistance at once. He was still a simple tonsured cleric himself and would only be ordained priest on 17 December 1707. At the end of 1705 he established his community of more than fifty seminarians in a large house on Rue Neuve St-Etienne (Rue Rollin), which provided space for seventy.

\* \* \*

The spirituality of the AA transformed Poullart des Places. At Rennes he had felt for the poor but he never envisaged consecrating his life to them or embracing poverty to the point of becoming poor

with the poor. Docility to his spiritual director had led him to Louis-le-Grand. He was soon picked out by the members of the AA. After scrutinizing his character, his affection for 'works of mercy', his ability to keep the secret, they decided to make known their association to him and coopt him as a confrere. Between the AA and Claude there was pre-established harmony. From the moment of his reception he experienced a spiritual transport that bore him into the state of affective prayer (Michel pp. 88-94). According to Fr Libermann this state explains the astonishing boldness which he, a simple tonsured cleric, showed in founding his work for the poor scholars. **'The most difficult things cost nothing to a soul who is truly in affective prayer; one undertakes everything, one is capable of everything, one does not hesitate, whatever the pains and difficulties one meets'** (ES p. 93). Claude's only ambition now was to prepare poor scholars for the priesthood and communicate to them such an ideal of poverty that they would be, in the hands of the bishops, totally available for the service of the most abandoned souls.

## ORIGINAL FEATURES OF THE NEW FOUNDATION

Poullart des Places's foundation was not simply one more effort among communities of poor scholars. Its originality flowed from a coherent plan which, by its demands as regards poverty and the gratuity and duration of the students' studies, was the finest realization in France of what the Council of Trent indicated for the training of clerics.

### 1 - A MYSTIQUE OF POVERTY

The seminary regulations were categorical: 'One may not, under any pretext whatever, admit people who can pay for their lodgings elsewhere' (no. 6). Each candidate was recruited from among the poor and knew that he would follow courses at the Jesuits and so renounce, from the outset, university degrees and the hope of lucrative benefices. In Poullart des Places's priestly ideal, the virtue of poverty was particularly accentuated. He knew how to persuade his scholars that 'disin-

terestendness is the beginning of perfection for a soul that desires to follow Jesus Christ'.

His life conformed to his exhortations. He was hardly tonsured when he refused a benefice of 4000 pounds, to his father's great disappointment, who 'did not approve of his son's taking the virtue (of poverty) so seriously' (Thomas p. 272). In 1706 he declined three benefices designated in his favour in the court of Rome, and he would accept no clerical remuneration except the sixty pounds of pension required by canonical legislation. Without subterfuge he became one with his own poor scholars, sharing their food, observing their regulation, doing the dish-washing and polishing the shoes (Thomas p. 274). His ambition was to raise his scholars to such a mystique of poverty that on leaving the house 'they would be ready for everything: to serve in hospitals, to evangelize the poor and even the pagans, not only to accept but wholeheartedly to embrace and prefer to others the humblest and most laborious positions for which people are found with difficulty' (Rules, ch. 1, in Le Floch, 2nd edn, p. 587).

## 2 - LEARNING AND VIRTUE

Even since childhood, and still more from the time of his entrance into the AA, Poullart des Places was concerned for the poor. He was convinced that 'their souls were no less dear to Jesus Christ than those of the great lords, and that there was hope for as much fruit from them, or even more' (Thomas p. 268). He intended to make his scholars priests who would be both virtuous and learned. Among the poor scholars who came forward he chose, after an understanding with them, those he judged most capable of acquiring knowledge and virtue. 'He used to say that, if he dreaded the blind zeal of a pious but unlearned priest, he had fears for the faith and submission to the Church of a priest who was learned but devoid of virtue' (*Gallia Christiana*, t. 7, Paris 1744, col. 1043). The students admitted from the start of their clerical studies were assured of being housed, fed, sometimes even clothed, free of charge for at least six years, and a maximum of nine years. Free of all material cares, they followed the same courses as the scholastics of the Society of Jesus, in order to eschew new opinions and maintain papal infallibility. Poullart des Places handed on these recommendations to his disciples. According to the words of the Sulpician, Fr Grandet, his contemporary, he trained them



'according to the principles of the purest Roman Catholic teaching' (*Life of Grignon de Montfort*, Nantes 1724, p. 563).

### 3 – WITHIN THE ORBIT OF JESUIT INFLUENCE

Along with the Paris Foreign Missions, Holy Ghost Seminary was one of the finest gems of the AA, but its dependence on the Jesuits was much closer. Without their authorization it would never have been born, without their support it would not have lasted. His students could choose only Jesuits as confessors, retreats were preached by a Jesuit, the students were even partly fed from the left-overs of food at Louis-le-Grand. The Society was the founder's mainstay, for the long, solid theological and spiritual training that he insisted on for his poor clerics was an adaptation to the secular clergy of a very Ignatian thought (F. de Bainville, in *Etudes*, t. 317, 1962, p. 125). Another satisfying point for the professors of Louis-le-Grand was that the number of their theologian-scholastics (45 in 1705) was quickly doubled by that of the Spiritans. But what pleased the Jesuits annoyed the Janse-nists. They pointed to the intellectual, spiritual and culinary dependence of the 'Placists' on Louis-le-Grand to try to ridicule them by calling them 'Jesuit nurslings'. Cardinal de Noailles tried to stop them frequenting Louis-Le-Grand. Poullart des Places explained so well the risks that frequenting the university would mean for his ideal of disinterested dedication that the cardinal 'appreciated the reasons and did not insist' (*Archives C.S.Sp*; Letter of Fr Bouic, 16 January 1727). After the Jesuits were expelled in 1767, the Parliament of Paris tried to coerce the successors of Poullart des Places into sending their students to the courses at the Sorbonne. Christopher de Beaumont, second successor of Cardinal de Noailles, tried to refute the founder's reasoning, but once again the answer was convincing. Alone of all the seminaries in Paris, the students of Holy Ghost would follow only the classes of their directors.

### 4 – NEGOTIATIONS TOWARDS COLLABORATION WITH JOHN BAPTIST DE LA SALLE

By 1708 Poullart des Places's reputation was such that John Baptist de la Salle, like Grignon de Montfort, thought of winning his collaboration. In 1707 he had drawn up a 'Plan for the Reform of

Schools and for Children's Education' (in Michel p. 325-328). It comprised three elements: Brothers for the cities; teachers for the children in towns and countryside; a community of priests, whose members would undertake the direction of the Brothers, watch over the purity of their doctrinal formation, and hear the school-children's Confessions. His Brothers, about one hundred in number, ran twenty schools in big cities. In 1708 he directed the zeal of Fr Clement, a young ecclesiastic who helped him to buy a house at St-Denis, towards the formation of teachers for the countryside. He considered that this initiative would have a better chance of success with the collaboration of Poullart des Places. 'To this end', narrates Fr J. B. Blain, one of his first biographers, 'he proposed to Fr Clement. . . to go and see Fr Desplaces, who was training a good number of ecclesiastics in community; he gave him to hope that he would find subjects there fit to head both the seminary of school-teachers for the countryside and the children whose education he was planning. The priest followed his advice and was highly pleased with his visit to Fr Despalces. The two set to work together. After making a plan for the education of young boys, they drew up a memorandum which they brought to the cardinal (de Noailles), who gave his assent' (*Life of J. B. de la Salle*, t. 2, Rouen, 1733, p. 75). The seminary at St-Denis opened at Easter 1709. The Brothers looked after the professional training of the trainee teachers; the Spiritans' task was to hear the pupils' Confessions and watch their behaviour. But the rising cost of food because of the extremely cold winter obliged Fr Clement to close the establishment. It is most likely that J. B. de la Salle, in directing this young priest to Poullart des Places, hoped that des Places's young community could constitute the third element of his plan for the Christian education of children. The closing of the St-Denis house did not end relations between the Brothers and the Spiritans. We know, for example, that Fr Adrien Vat, from the time of his Ordination in 1703 until his association with Grignon de Montfort in 1715, was, at Paris, confessor to the Brothers in their noviciate (Beshard p. 640; Y. Poutet, Poullart des Places et J-B de la Salle, in *Spiritus*, February 1961, pp. 49-67).

## 5 - A HOUSE OF CHARITY, CRADLE OF A CONGREGATION

From the month of March 1703 onwards, the secret correspondence of the AA designates Poullart des Places 'director of a seminary'. In official acts he himself never uses any title other than 'eccle-

siastic'. In the General and Particular Regulations he never speaks of seminarians and community but of house, scholars, individuals ('particuliers') — a word occurring sixteen times in the Regulations; it is used in the AA correspondence to designate members of that association — and also a tailor and a cook, whose way of life is obviously akin to religious. Legally his enterprise is only a work of charity. This was in order to circumvent the law of 1666, which strictly forbade the establishment of all new communities without first obtaining patent letters. It also avoided the statute of canonical seminaries which gave the bishops — who were often Jansenists — the right to accept or expel, as seemed good to them, each person engaged in the direction of seminaries. Nevertheless, the study of the oldest documents which have come down to us confirms that Poullart des Places was not only the founder of a seminary but also founder of a new religious society, 'father and head of a sacerdotal family' (Thomas p. 250).

In 1731 patent letters would be granted to the 'Community and Seminary of the Holy Ghost', an institute of diocesan right formed by its directors. The Rules and Constitutions which the latter would present to the parliament, and which would be inspired in their essential points by the Jesuit Constitutions, would be followed by this solemn declaration: 'In the Lord we beg our brothers and successors to keep with care these pious customs, which, for the most part, we received from Claude Francis Poullart des Places, priest, our founder'.

To help govern the house, Poullart des Places had coopted Michel-Vincent Le Barbier (1705), first Spiritan priest, and Jacques Hyacinthe Garnier, who had arrived as a subdeacon in 1705 and was ordained priest in 1707. Louis Bouic, ordained deacon in Brittany in September 1709, had come to Paris a few weeks later. Holy Ghost Seminary, which lived on alms, was tragically affected by the winter of 1708, and still more by the famine that ensued. Le Barbier resigned in June and died in Brittany eleven months later. Poullart des Places himself died on 2 October, and Garnier, his successor, in March 1710. Bouic, a priest since September 1709, was elected superior. Along with Pierre Thomas, the founder's biographer, and Caris, 'the poor priest', he would rule the seminary and the Congregation for more than half a century.

NOTE: Contrary to a Spiritan tradition, born of a faulty copy (later than 1848) of a register of the 18th century, Bouic lived with Poullart des Places during the academic year 1708-1709. His dimissorial letters for the priesthood, signed by the Bishop of St-Malo on 28 August 1708, authorized him to be ordained by Cardinal de Noailles.



For two years (1741-43) he was superior of Besnard, who wrote: 'I have it from the person who was superior of this house after Fr Desplaces and who had been his student. . .'

## 6 - UNDER THE SIGN OF THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

**All the students will adore in a special way the Holy Spirit, to whom they have been particularly consecrated. To this they will add a personal devotion to the Blessed Virgin, through whose protection they have been offered to the Holy Spirit. As their two principal feasts they will choose Pentecost and the Immaculate Conception. The first they will celebrate to obtain from the Holy Spirit the fire of divine love; the second to obtain from the Blessed Virgin an angelic purity. Their piety will be grounded in these two virtues (Writings p. 79).**

The direct inspiration for the twofold dedication to the Holy Spirit and the Immaculate Virgin is easily discernible in the 'meditations' of the AA:

*On the day of Pentecost and all that week I will open my heart to the Holy Spirit that he may fill it and take possession of it intimately, that he may be the spirit of my spirit and the heart of my heart. I will offer it to him that he may consume it as a victim with the flames of his love. This practice will accustom me to considering the Spirit of God dwelling intimately within me; he is a spirit of love, asking nothing else than to kindle in my heart the same flames with which he inflames the Father and the Son, and thus to abandon my soul and heart entirely to him, so that they breathe nothing more but the love of God. . . To beseech the Holy Spirit, who prepared our Lady's soul and body to receive the divine Word, that he would dispose my soul by charity, my body by purity, for that ineffable union that his love seeks in the Eucharist.*

'The twofold devotion' of the Spiritans would determine their spirituality. Their prayers would be those of a community dedicated to the Holy Spirit and the Blessed Virgin, conceived without sin: the Office of the Holy Spirit and the Marian prayers, including the **Per sanctam** so dear to Poullart des Places: *Through your holy virginity and*

*your Immaculate Conception, O most pure Virgin Mary, purify my heart and my senses.* It would also be the foundation of Spiritan poverty. Allenou de la Ville-Angevin, immediate disciple of Poullart des Places, said to his Daughters of the Holy Spirit: *'The young ladies who wish to live a holy life in this house will remember that by taking the Holy Spirit as father and the Blessed Virgin as mother they are to renounce all possessions'*. Nicolas Warnet, seventh successor of Poullart des Places, said, in the course of the renewal ceremony of Pentecost 1839:

**'Despoiled of everything, we are rich enough. The Holy Spirit's love is our treasure. We must leave everything at Mary's feet, as the first Christians left all their goods at the apostles' feet; otherwise we would be lying to the Holy Spirit'. Their apostolic zeal has the same source. 'We undertake to seek the honour of the Holy Spirit first of all within ourselves, by a spirit of perfect docility. We must be led by the Holy Spirit, follow his impressions alone. . . . Then we will be in a position to fulfil another duty: as children of Mary and the Holy Spirit, we will exert ourselves by word and example to have them loved and served. . . . This is how we will walk in the footsteps of our fathers, certain that it is the surest way of doing what pleases the Holy Spirit' (in Michel pp. 300-301).**

## 7 - ORIENTATION TOWARDS THE MISSIONS

From the year 1732 the apostolate in overseas countries played an increasing part in the orientation of the seminary students (called Spiritans). Towards 1750, four of the six vicars apostolic emanating from the Paris Foreign Missions Society had been trained at Holy Ghost. Other Spiritans, recruited by the chaplain general of the missions of New France, the Abbé of Isle-Dieu, were teaching theology at the seminary of Quebec. Still others were missionaries in Acadia or among the Micmac Indians. The dedication and ability of these Spiritans in Canada inspired in the chaplain general such an esteem for the seminary that trained them that he tried to have it entrusted with furnishing the clergy of the French colonies of the West Indies and Guyana. His plan only partially materialized. The superior general of the Holy Ghost Congregation became directly responsible for the prefecture apostolic of St Pierre and Miquelon, which was erected in 1765, and,

ten years later, for the colony of Cayenne. In 1778 for the first time two members of the Congregation, Déglicourt and Bertout, left their professorial chairs and set sail for Guyana. The following year Déglicourt was appointed prefect apostolic of the Coast of Africa. When the Convention, at the French Revolution, dissolved the Congregation, it had trained at least 1,000 priests, about 6% or 7% of whom went overseas.

### HOLY GHOST SEMINARY, SEMINARY OF THE COMPANY OF MARY

In 1713 Grignon de Montfort had indeed written the rule of the Company of Mary, but he still had no members. In the month of August he came 'to confer with the directors of Holy Ghost Seminary and to read for them the rule he had composed for those of their students and others who wished to join him' (Besnard p. 315). Bouic and his confreres promised to train missionaries for him, and he left Paris, having completed the great business for which he had come, 'namely, his understanding with the priests of Holy Ghost to to have missionaries' (Besnard p. 328). An unexpected consequence of this 'holy association' was that in 1716, the year of his death, Montfort signed his name with the addition, 'missionary priest of the Company of the Holy Ghost'. This fact has intrigued his biographers. In 1947 the department for historical studies in the Sacred Congregation of Rites concluded: '**quando morì, la sua Compagnia... aveva... una certa affiliazione al Seminario dello Spirito Santo, che doveva assicurarne i soggetti**' (when he died, his Company had a certain affiliation with Holy Ghost Seminary, which was to guarantee subjects for it) (*Nova Inquisitio...* 1947, p. 314). The nature of the association between Fr de Montfort and the sons of Fr des Places remains open to discussion; so is its extent. Without that union, the Company of Mary would not have survived. Throughout the 18th century the Montfortians were scarcely known as other than 'priest missionaries of the Company of the Holy Spirit'. Under this title they obtained patent letters in 1765. At least two thirds of them had come from Holy Ghost Seminary, where even priests educated in diocesan seminaries would be invited to complete their formation for two years. For over half a century Montfortians and Daughters of Wisdom would be governed by Spirit-



taris; the geographic recruitment area of Montfortians would be that of Holy Ghost Seminary; the missionaries who would play a major role in Vendée during the French Revolution were neither from Anger nor Poitiers but from the Jura, from Provence and especially Picardy.

### HOLY GHOST SEMINARY AND THE DAUGHTERS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

During Poullart des Places's lifetime, René Allenou de la Ville-Angevin, of the diocese of St-Brieuc (1687-1753), was a student at Holy Ghost Seminary, where he exercised the functions of teacher of philosophy, then of theology. Back in Brittany in 1712 and appointed rector of Plérin two years later, he found in his little parish three young ladies who, without living together in community, were running a small school, teaching catechism, dedicating themselves to the poor and sick. From this little group he was to form a Congregation 'dedicated to the Holy Spirit under the invocation of the Immaculate Virgin Mary, conceived without sin'. According to the oldest account of this foundation, 'he formed a regulation on the model of that which he had observed in Holy Ghost Seminary'. The relationship is striking between the General and Particular Rules of the two founders, but while that of Poullart des Places is drawn up with extreme sobriety that of his disciple is inspired both by the text and the 'spiritual commentaries of his former superior. Allenou de la Ville-Angevin left for Canada in 1741 and died there. He, more than Jean Leuduger, was the founder of the Daughters of the Holy Spirit (cf Michel p. 329-338). In 1963 the Congregation numbered more than 3,000 members.

### FRANCIS LIBERMANN, 10TH SUCCESSOR OF POULLART DES PLACES

During the last quarter of the 18th century, Poullart des Places's Congregation, by its orientation towards the abandoned souls of the black race, had gone far towards preparing to receive Libermann's 'Work for the Blacks' into its bosom at the providential moment.

After the French Revolution it was authorized to be reconstituted solely to furnish priests for the French colonies. Account being taken of the condition of the French clergy, this task was so fraught with difficulties that Libermann would consider it 'a real drudgery' (Letter of 27 April 1847; ND IX 134). In 1839 Libermann founded the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary. The missionaries he sent out to the colonies met Spiritans like Monnet, 'father of the blacks' of Bourbon. The union of the two societies appeared 'in the order of God's will. They set out to do the same work, they take the same line; now it is not in the order of divine providence to raise up two societies for a particular task if one alone suffices' (ND X 339). On 11 June 1848 the principle of union was accepted by both sides. On 4 September the Holy See approved it, making explicit that it should be done in such a way that the Holy Heart of Mary Society ceased to exist, that its members become incorporated into the Holy Ghost Society. On 23 November, by ten votes out of eleven, Libermann became the tenth successor of Poullart des Places. In Libermann's writings the name of the founder of the Holy Ghost Congregation has not been found, but he did not hesitate to retouch in a wholly Spiritan way the act of consecration he had drawn up eight years previously for the Holy Heart of Mary Society (Michel p. 304). He died four years after the Roman decision. For successor he had Ignatius Schwindenhammer, who, with those around him, forged the myth of a new society issuing from the fusion of the two societies, of which Libermann would have been the first superior general (Koren, *To The Ends of the Earth*, p. 397).

In 1901, at the time of the persecution of religious Congregations by Combes in France, Archbishop Alexander Le Roy, superior general, was informed that, on the advice of the Council of State, 'the Association of the Holy Ghost has ceased to exist and that Association of Missionaries of the Holy Heart of Mary, which took its name, is not a legally authorized religious Congregation'. A study of the Spiritan archives revealed that Le Roy was not, as he had thought, the fifth but the fifteenth superior general. He drew up a memorandum that emphasized particularly the Roman decision of 1848 and appealed to the Council of State, which, in fact, revoked its decision. As a result of this alert, Poullart des Places was progressively recognized as founder of the Holy Ghost Congregation. In 1906 Fr Le Floch published a biography of him. Finally the general chapter of 1919 adopted unanimously the following conclusions: 'The Founder of the Congregation is Claude Francis Poullart des Places... The Venerable Francis Mary Paul Libermann is honoured as second founder and spiritual father...'

The Holy Ghost Congregation, founded in Paris in 1703, alone subsists. The Venerable Francis Mary Paul Libermann, elected superior general to replace Mgr A. Monnet, who was the tenth, is the eleventh'.

## PRINCIPAL SOURCES AND ABBREVIATIONS

Poullart des Places: **Writings**, Introduced by Fr J. Lécuyer in **Spiritan Papers**, no. 16, 1983, Rome

Quoted: Writings

(Thomas, Pierre): **Memorandum on Poullart des Places**, published by Fr H. Koren in **The Spiritual Writings of Claude Francis Poullart des Places**, Pittsburgh, 1959, pp. 226-275

Quoted: Thomas

Besnard, Charles, S.M.M.: **Life of Louis Grignon de Montfort**, Work completed towards 1770, published in Rome, 1981, by the Montfortian International Centre, pp. 680, 34 of which treat of Poullart des Places or his followers. (French)

Quoted: Besnard

Michel, Joseph: **Claude Francis Poullart des Places, Founder of the Holy Ghost Congregation**, Paris 1962 (French)

Quoted: Michel

The attribution of the *Memorandum* to Pierre Thomas, one of Poullart des Places's first scholars, may be considered as eminently probable. Its author set out 'to recount what we have witnessed since the establishment of his community was begun' (p. 266). This manuscript is valuable for us but, as Fr Koren points out, 'it is only a laborious outline never completed' (p. 266). Its principal fault is to stop just before the foundation of Holy Ghost Seminary. Besnard narrates this foundation and gives a succinct account of the founder's illness and death. He obviously had access to sources other than the Thomas manuscript as it has come down to us — quite probably the Thomas manuscript completed.





## II - CLAUDE FRANCIS POULLART DES PLACES

A Life-Experience under the Breath of the Spirit

by Maurice Gobeil, cssp.

### INTRODUCTION

I was happy to say Yes to Fr Alphonse Gilbert's request to publish this article in **Spiritans Today**, in all Spiritan simplicity. This essay is not a specialist's production nor an original historical research, but my joy is no less great for being able to share with my Spiritan confreres everywhere what Poullart des Places can say to me, a Spiritan today, through a loving reading of his writings and biographies. This Yes is also owed to my Spiritan confreres, who have encouraged me and collaborated in the preparation or, still more, who made me reflect by their questions.

### A LIFE-EXPERIENCE

What experience of life? Poullart des Places died young, and he left little in writing. Besides, Holy Ghost seminary was in such a state in 1848 that if Libermann had not come on the scene, and so on! These are reflections I have heard in our own province and elsewhere. And yet we Spiritans are inheritors of a twofold tradition (1703-1848; 1848-1984). This double affiliation to Poullart and Libermann is a richness where we have nothing to subtract from one to reinforce the other. Memory is a duty without which social and cultural unities become uprooted. Pope John Paul II, in his speeches in Canada, insisted on this memory. Perhaps too many Spiritans could still say today, with Archbishop Le Roy, 'the Congregation's history remains

unknown to us' (Archives C.S.Sp.; Notes of Mgr Le Roy to Fr Cabon, August 1928).

**We have always placed all our repose and happiness in Mary's heart, filled with the eminent superabundance of the Holy Spirit, and if we did not express the fulness of the Holy Spirit in Mary's heart nevertheless it formed the essence of our devotion (ND IX 567-8).**

It is time today, in fidelity to our twofold heritage, to express that 'fulness of the Holy Spirit'.

### UNDER THE BREATH OF THE SPIRIT

As for all of us, the life-experience of Poullart des Places under the breath of the Holy Spirit is rooted in his baptism on 27 February 1679 in the parish church of St Peter and St George, Rennes. The graces and charisms received on that occasion were deployed throughout his youth, which was marked by the family atmosphere, his surroundings, his native Brittany, his friends, certain reading matter and the directors in whom he confided. 'Vowed' to God by his parents at the time of his birth, Claude Poullart wore white clothes for seven years in honour of our Lady. The Blessed Virgin drew the Spirit into his heart.

*There can be no doubt that Mary somehow has the power to attract the Spirit into the hearts of her children, not like the apostles in the hierarchical order (In 20:22), but in her own maternal way according to the demands of her mission (Felix Gils, Désaltérés par l'unique Esprit, ed. St Paul, Paris, pp. 194-5).*

In the Brittany of Claude's youth and among his Jesuit teachers in Paris, this devotion to the Holy Spirit and to our Lady was to be found. 'The Missionaries of the Holy Spirit' were at Quimper in Brittany, and in 1680 a manual for the use of priests was reedited, entitled: 'The Institution of the Congregation of Ecclesiastics dedicated to the Holy Spirit, under the title of his holy spouse, the Blessed Virgin'. How can we not think of Poullart's private rule:



**My morning prayers will consist of a 'Veni Sancte'... I will recite the Sancta Maria to place myself under the Blessed Virgin's protection (Writings, 116-118).**

Among Poullart's teachers and directors, the great spiritual master of the time was Fr Lallemand, whose 'Life and Teaching' Fr Champion had published in 1694. The two poles of this spirituality were 'purity of heart and the leading of the Holy Spirit... the goal we aspire to is to be possessed and governed by the Holy Spirit; the means (esteemed essential both by Poullart and by Libermann) is to be exercised in purity of heart' (Louis Lallemand, *Life and Spiritual Doctrine*, Collection Christus no. 3, Paris 1959, pp. 176-177).

**As their two principal feasts they will choose Pentecost and the Immaculate Conception. The first they will celebrate to obtain from the Holy Spirit the fire of divine love; the second to obtain from the Blessed Virgin an angelic purity: two virtues which should constitute the foundation of their piety (Writings 164).**

Here again the Blessed Virgin comes to allow the Spirit entrance through purification. Libermann will speak of purification, self-denial, mortification in order to reach the point where one is led by the Holy Spirit, through surrender and leading to union. This will likewise be Claude Poullart des Places's spiritual progress. (*Note*: Libermann also had certainly read Lallemand, whom he recommends to a seminarian (LS II 49; 1838). In both Lallemand (p. 188) and Libermann (ND II 87) are found the same image of the boat in full sail, for describing those who let themselves be led by the Holy Spirit).

### FIRST CONVERSION (1697)

(*Note*: The expression 'first conversion', by which God calls someone to his service, and 'second conversion', by which God draws to the perfection of his service, are found in Lallemand. The expression, 'second conversion', is also applied to Libermann by Fr Bernard Kelly, C.S.Sp., in *Life Began at Forty. The Second Conversion of Francis Libermann*, Paraclete Press, Dublin 1983).

Exceptionally intelligent, wealthy and full of charm, Claude had a

promising future ahead of him on finishing his philosophical studies in June 1679. Forgetting his earlier idea of becoming a priest, his vacation passed in worldly activities and even effected his entry into the Paris *salons*. But Someone was watching over him. The Spirit brought a swift and brilliant light into his heart and a Power took over his delicate conscience. Back at Rennes Claude took some days off for reflection. He realized how much he was unfaithful to God's grace and heard once again the call to God's service — 'in other words, he felt converted' (Writings, p. 243). His desire was sincere but his ambitiousness continued. He would be a great preacher and convert France by his eloquence! His motivation for serving God was still too human and his resolution would last only 'forty days' (Writings, p. 243). The Spirit worked through his father, who suggested that Claude go and study law at Nantes in October 1679 to mature his vocation. On the road to Nantes the incident happened of Claude wounding the carriage-driver and having to go to court. He would regret this afterwards as an 'enormous crime'; M. Thomas calls it 'the most humiliating moment of his life' (Writings, p. 244).

The affair, banal in itself, gave Poullart a feeling of failure, not only confronted with God's grace but confronted with himself. He realized how much his worldly pride entered into his deepest reflexes, that he was driven by things external to himself. This feeling of failure pursued him after his return home at the beginning of 1700 after his law studies. What would he do with his life? Continue a brilliant lawyer's career, all the while with this interior void? He dreaded that. But in the very centre of this void, while looking at himself one day in the lawyer's robes that his family had prepared, 'God enlightened him with a vivid light' (Michel 54). What does this 'vivid light' mean? An intense interior experience, a peak-experience with power of healing, power of preparation, conversion and revelation (Jean-Luc Métu, *Psychologie de l'expérience intérieure*, Ed. du Méridien, Montréal, 1983, pp. 11-49). This 'conversion' had still to mature. The interior revelation of God to a human being, which both inflames the heart and blinds the intelligence, is accompanied by euphoria and bursts of enthusiasm. It is a temporary grace that must be nourished and left behind, for one risks being left bewildered when the passing euphoria disappears. Claude Poullart hesitated and then compromised with the family ambitions, which, indirectly, may have pleased his worldly personality, quite turned to the exterior at the expense of the interior. He went into his father's business for a year. Claude associated with companions who pandered to his desire for glory but, a year later, the

‘void’ persisted and he could not stifle the Spirit in him, ‘always frightened when I forget my God’, he says (Writings, 94).

Like Libermann after the Rennes failure, he needed that purification of mind and senses before surrendering to the ‘vivid light’ that Libermann calls ‘interior illumination’ (ND I 661), to come to ‘second conversion’.

## SECOND CONVERSION: UNDER THE BREATH OF THE SPIRIT (1701)

Claude Poullart withdrew to the retreat-house at Rennes in 1701. His retreat notes fill two copy-books. The first, called ‘Reflections on the Truths of Religion’ is a personal summary of the retreat talks; it reveals a very human personality, gravitating towards a good God, a God of love. The second, ‘Choice of a State of Life’, contains two elements: the balance-sheet of his qualities and defects, and an analysis of his inclination for religious life; this is his second conversion: a choice of God in the midst of the world’s attractions, a conversion from tepidity to fervour. He re-found the experience of his baptismal condition, contact with the indwelling Trinity, under the Spirit’s breath. This was surrender. ‘O my God, you who lead people to the new Jerusalem when they genuinely trust you, I have recourse to your providence, I surrender myself completely to it’ (Writings 118; the same emphasis on the Trinity and on surrender is found in the ordinary prayers of the Missionaries of the Holy Heart of Mary, ND III 393-5).

The text of the ‘Choice of a State of Life’ contains elements valuable for all Spiritans who help young people to choose their career. Claude speaks of himself and shows a limpid clarity of self-knowledge. He does not look at the different states of life in terms of metaphysical questions or subjective reasoning of the kind, ‘I like’ or ‘I do not like’. He asks if God wants his service. He also ponders over that external call of God which makes itself known through the crying needs of the Church as People of God. Within that twofold call — internal and external — he seeks his balance in a personal response. This is a very relevant challenge. In the perspective of modern psychology, the exigencies of the interior ‘I’ can become so exasperating and absolute that the external calls of one’s state in life are not given enough weight.



Vocation is to that extent weakened. Thus Claude neglects no aspect of his vocation that demands a vital answer, an answer to himself, to God and to the Church. Nor did he make any concessions to his vanity. This second conversion involved already a purification of his ambitious spirit. Eschewing the prestige and degrees of the Surbonne, M. Desplaces (as he would be known in Paris) took his place as one of the 450 students of theology at Louis-le-Grand in Paris in October 1701. On the feast of the Assumption, 15 August, the following year, he received tonsure. He put himself at the service of God, who was now the centre of his life. In prayer he came daily closer to the Lord. He made reparation for his past misdeeds by closeness to the suffering Christ. In the Spirit's powerful breath, who bore him along in this second conversion, it seems that the reading of the 'Life of Michel Le Nobletz' had a determining impact on his experience:

*This was a Breton priest who had died some fifty years before. Like Claude, this priest, declared Venerable in 1913, had studied with the Jesuits, had been chosen to defend publicly a philosophical thesis at the end of his studies and had the same youthful Marian devotion. He had even been on the point of using his sword in a fit of anger. Besides, he had strongly advocated disregard for worldly honor, again, precisely the inclination that Claude had to struggle against so much (Koren p. 7).*

All these striking details of parallel meant that M. des Places saw himself in Michel Le Nobletz; he re-read him and meditated this model of holiness. The Holy Spirit used this discovery as an instrument to impart a Pentecostal dynamism to M. des Places.

### GRACES OF PRAYER (1702-1704)

At this stage of his life, during the retreat to prepare for tonsure, M. des Places laid down a concrete detailed plan for his spiritual progress. This is the 'Fragments or Resolutions for a Personal Rule' (Writings, 116 ff), which contains the prayer to the Holy Trinity that reveals his preoccupations and fervour. Today, when work and the apostolate draw us out of ourselves so much, sometimes devouring us to the point of 'burnout', this discipline and asceticism of Claude Poullart's might encourage us to include in our personal and community

life these necessary moments of closeness to our confreres and to God.

Within a few months M. des Places came to experience an extraordinary liberation. From being passionate for glory, jealous of his success, always troubled about not realizing his ambitions, our convert asked God from the bottom of his heart for absolute detachment from himself and all things. In his 'Reflections on the Past' (Writings 26 ff), he has left us a clear picture of his interior life throughout the eighteen months of fervour that followed tonsure. One can easily follow the activity of the Holy Spirit filling the young levite with precious gifts (including the gift of tears: Writings 136) and guiding all his movements. It would be helpful to our own spiritual life to follow M. des Places step by step through his 'Reflections on the Past'. But, as Fr Michel did, it is still more helpful for us personally and as spiritual directors to put side by side with it the normative description of that step that Fr Libermann so competently gave in his 'Spiritual Writings'.

Quite different from those of Poullart's time, the appeals of today's world (sex, drugs, sects, and so on) are no less strong as they succeed in drawing numbers of young people who, in fact, would ask no better to fill that void they experience than the fulness which is Christ's love. Will they find true witnesses and true gurus along their path? Are we those witnesses and guides? *'This youth, which shows such good will alongside its dark side, has great need of finding in us a trusting attentiveness and the compelling example of disciples of Christ who are happy to walk in his steps'* (John Paul II). Are we Spiritans not often strangers to our own riches, our own apostolic mystique? I feel it useful in this context to take up Claude Poullart's description of what he lived in his spiritual evolution (graces of consolation, of purification, then of practical union) in the light that Libermann throws on it, in that way drawing on our twofold heritage.

**'REFLECTIONS ON THE PAST' (1704)**  
(Poullart des Places)

**'SPIRITUAL WRITINGS' (1851)**  
(Libermann)

**I received abundant consolations... Whenever I made some effort to approach the Lord, that merciful Master immediately carried me for many leagues on his shoulders (p. 132)**

I desired to love him alone, and out of love for him I would have renounced the most legitimate attachments of this life. I wanted to be despoiled of everything, living only on alms after giving everything away. Of all temporal things I wanted to keep health alone, and I wanted to offer the latter in a complete sacrifice to God in the work of the missions. I would have felt most happy if, after enkindling the fire of God's love in the hearts of all men, I could have shed the very last drop of my blood for him whose mercies were almost always present before my mind (p. 134)

I never tired of speaking about these favors. I found too few people to whom I could recount his mercies towards me. I found pleasure only in conversations in which God was not forgotten. I accused myself for having kept silence when I had missed a chance to speak of him (p. 134)

People who talked to me about other things were unbearable to me (p. 134).

I spent much time before the Blessed Sacrament. This was my happiest and most frequent recreation. I prayed the greater part of the day, even while walking in the streets, and I was immediately disturbed when I noticed that for some time I had lost the presence of him whom alone I desired to love (p. 135)

I met few people and was in love with solitude. In it I often recalled my past disorders. They even constituted the regular subject of my meditations. My eyes shed abundant tears at such

*The most difficult things cost nothing to a soul in affective prayer. One undertakes and is capable of everything, does not weigh it up, whatever the pain and difficulty. The more intense the prayer, the greater one's force (p. 193) The immediate effect of this gift is a violent love of God, unto a kind of madness; one offers him all. Souls favoured with this gift in a high degree are ordinarily far on in the ways of the interior life and perfection (p. 172)*

*These souls are consumed with the desire to have God loved and served by all those around them, and they set about this forcefully, to persuade others by actions and words (p. 197).*

*One cannot suffer conversations not related to God, whom one wishes to speak about all the time (p. 197).*

*These people find it easy to stay in the presence of God; it would even be difficult not to, in this state of prayer. They take measures to stay thus, and their presence to God is loving and gentle (p. 198).*

*They have a great understanding of their sins, in general way. Their sins are always present to their eyes; they humiliate themselves before God and are filled with sorrow (p. 198)*



times when I recalled my past aberrations. Their wickedness seemed to increase day by day. What I had looked upon formerly as a sin that was quite ordinary and of no particular malice, now appeared infinitely hideous to me. The malice of my former sins seemed to grow in my eyes day by day, as I advanced in meditation on my faults in God's presence. Totally ashamed at such times, filled with sentiments of horror towards myself, I could hardly bear myself and remained filled with thoughts of humility (p. 135)

I despised myself, and others were often able to know this, for I sometimes took pleasure in humiliating myself before them. This virtue which I had begun to practise, thanks to a surprising effect of grace after I had been perhaps the vainest man in the world, drew down upon me a great number of God's blessings (p. 135).

I had a sensible awareness of those blessings by the fact that I experienced a holy eagerness to approach the Sacrament of the altar. Although I had the privilege of communicating frequently, I did not yet receive Communion as often as I wished. I hungered so ardently for the sacred Bread that, when partaking of it, I frequently was unable to restrain the torrents of my tears. It was by partaking of the Body of Jesus that I conceived that spirit of detachment which made me despise the world and its ways. I cared little for its esteem and even tried sometimes to displease it by going counter to its customs.

*The effects (of the gift of tears) are great tenderness for God, a great desire to please him and serve him well (p. 172)*

*When we weep for our sins, we might think our attention would be on ourselves, but it is on God (p. 172).*

*Our spirit becomes extremely fervent, making us do things another person would be ashamed of. This gift varies in intensity. When very intense, one acts like a fool before the world, like St Francis of Assisi at first and many other saints (p. 172).*

*I believe that generally the great devotion of these souls is the Blessed Sacrament; their desire to communicate is inexpressible; they sigh for the occasion impatiently, unable to wait. The effects of holy communion are considerable. . . . Our Lord's presence is felt in a living way (p. 196).*

*The poor soul is overcome with joy and love. . . . Tears flow in torrents and its delights are immense (p. 172).*

Jesus Christ crucified was the subject which most frequently occupied my thoughts, and in spite of the love of my body which still dominated me, I began to do some violence to myself and impose on myself some small mortifications.

Although I did not go very far in all this and consoled myself with the hope that I would do infinitely more in the future, at least I was faithful to my exercises, and I would have considered it a very great crime if I had taken my meals, however busy I was, without having previously nourished my mind with that salutary food which I received in mental prayer (p. 137)

I had leantred in these holy communings with God, to close my ears to all news, never to open my eyes in order to see things that might merely satisfy my curiosity, not even when walking through the city. I did not know any news, I did not look at anything beautiful; I did not want to rob God of a single moment. I wanted to think of him alone, and although I was far removed from thinking always of him, and often suffered rather long distractions, my mind was always full of him, sometimes even in my sleep and always at my first awakening.

I can add certain impulses of compassion which I felt towards those who suffer, a fair amount of kindness, after all my past pride, with respect to those I dealt with, an ardent zeal to incite sinners to return to God, and this went so far that, in order to succeed with them, I would have found nothing too

*Souls favoured with this gift sometimes go to frightening extremes of penance, not always rightly; they do not always discern correctly the things of God (p. 172).*

*They desire to do God's will in everything, and so they observe rules exactly and punctually in community, and undertake practices for God's glory (p. 199).*

*They have a great horror and disregard for the world (p. 198).*

*Their love for their neighbour is exceedingly lively, even too much so. They do the impossible in order to serve or please others (p. 200)*  
*A great advantage of this state is obedience and docility to the director and superiors in general. They reason about nothing. Their director or su-*

degrading. Finally, I had a blind obedience toward my director and respected his orders so greatly that I would have been unable to do the least thing without having previously obtained his permission for it (p. 137).

*perior tells them to do something — it is done* (p. 199).

I had the satisfaction of living in this manner for eighteen months, and I was most happy, as was natural, when I noticed that I had begun to grow more regular. I say, 'begun', for I was far from believing that that state of virtue was sufficient, and that I was now leading as holy a life as I ought. I had not been away from the world long enough to be free from the evil habits I had contracted while I lived in it. And these mingled with my small virtues, introducing numerous imperfections and sins (p. 139).

*This state lasts more or less time, according to the will of Him who gave it. Some souls stay in it for a year to eighteen months, others more or less long* (p. 163).

*If these souls in the beginning were not so bogged down in the self-love they indulged in before, this attachment (to the pleasures which come from their feelings about prayer) would be bad, but it works out good in some sense, at least in this state of prayer* (p. 205).

When M. des Places simply affirms, 'I could add some sentiments of tenderness I felt for those suffering', he is being too modest. Over and above his studies he was in fact expending enormous energy, first with the little chimney-sweeps, then with the poor scholars. Food hardships became joined to money hardships in favour of the needy members of Jesus Christ. When the scholars were settled in at 'Gros-Chapelet', he used to visit them every day, looking after their material needs and spiritual life, leading them in prayer. Twice a day M. des Places was praying God 'to know and carry out his holy will' (Writings, 120). His friend, Louis Grignon, met him again in Paris in April 1702, asking him to join him. M. des Places prayed and discerned in the Holy Spirit that his vocation was elsewhere: 'to help the poor scholars to continue their studies' (Michel 132).

**I know many scholars of admirable dispositions who for want of help cannot continue and are obliged to bury talents which would be useful for the Church if they were developed. This is**



**what I was about in gathering them into a single house (Michel 132-3).**

At the students' request (Michel 139) and with his confessor's approval, he decided to go ahead. In the divine pedagogy, prayer of affection is only a step, but a step particularly favorable for apostolic initiatives. It happened thus with M. des Places as with many other founders of orders or charitable institutions. At a moment he was in a state of affective prayer, as a simple tonsured cleric, he had the boldness to found a seminary, one living on alms.

### CONSECRATION TO THE HOLY SPIRIT

Poullart chose the feast of Pentecost, 27 May 1703, to bring his little community to the Church of St-Etienne-des-Grès, to the feet of the Black Virgin of Good Deliverance, there to consecrate it to the Holy Spirit. This invocation of the Blessed Virgin seems to foretell already the missionary trend of the 'Spiritans', starting from the rule of 1734, and Libermann's intuition to go to the 'blacks' (Michel 148: 'It was the founder's wish to vow his work to the Holy Spirit that explains the choice of Pentecost').

Louis Marie Grignon, Claude's friend, probably accompanied the group on that occasion. For Claude, it incarnated simultaneously devotion to the Holy Spirit and to the Blessed Virgin and his dream of the missions. This time the roles of the two friends were reversed. Louis Grignon, the student who was the dominant leader, now needed the hope that Claude's work was giving birth to in him, whereas Claude always had an adolescent aspect under the soutane (Papasogli Benedetta, *L'homme venu du vent. Louis Grignon de Montfort*, Editions Bellarmin, Montreal, 1984, p. 180). Also equally significant was the fact that the first two articles of the seminary rule dictate the place of the two devotions to the Holy Spirit and the Blessed Virgin.

**All the students will *adore in a special way the Holy Spirit*, to whom they have been particularly consecrated. To this *they will add a personal devotion to the Blessed Virgin*, through whose protection they have been offered to the Holy Spirit. As their two principal feasts they will choose Pentecost and the**

**Immaculate Conception.** The first they will celebrate to obtain from the Holy Spirit the fire of divine love; the second to obtain from the Blessed Virgin an angelic purity: two virtues which should constitute the foundation of their piety (Writings, 164; the author underlines himself).

These two devotions have always been in honour in our Congregation; their interconnection is well expressed here, completely in the sense of Vatican II — something which is not always clearly stated in our writings or devotional practices. Here again we do not have to lessen the one in order to increase the other, but we must articulate them according to the tradition in order to increase both of them. Perhaps we have not yet given enough place to the Holy Spirit. I believe, in fact, that, as a Congregation consecrated to the Holy Spirit, we hardly allow him to exert his power in us and in our apostolate. I would hope to find more in our future projected 'rules', under the section, 'Holy Spirit and Mary', of the dynamism of our historical riches.

### DRYNESS OR PURIFICATION BY THE HOLY SPIRIT (1704)

At the beginning of the school-year, in autumn, 1704, M. des Places was directing the growing community on his own, all the while pursuing his own theological studies. Thus he was tempted to see in the spiritual dryness which overtook him only the consequence of his new and heavy responsibilities. He did not understand what he was undergoing and considered himself responsible for losing the state of affective prayer. His detailed description in 'Reflections of the Past' is not bookish or speculative but bursts forth with emotion from his life-experience under the impulse of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit had led him as a blind man, not revealing to him that 'this prayer (affective) is not a permanent state, but only a way towards contemplation' (Ecrits Spirituels — Libermann, 182). To enter into contemplation, he had to go through this night of the senses, this night of the spirit, which in our lives as apostles often means failures, upsets, sufferings, sicknesses. He groped his way through this purification period.

It is true that God, who knew the depth from which he had rescued me and who had been satisfied at the beginning of my conversion with the least of my efforts, still knew how to be satisfied with the little that I gave him in the hope that finally I would be giving him more. He did not enter into judgement with his poor little servant because he knew the depths of the abyss which I had just left. Certainly I was not then in a condition where I could have been fully satisfied with myself. I took a strict account of myself and recognized that I was far removed from the state which I would have reached if I had corresponded faithfully with the daily graces God bestowed on me (p. 139).

The anxiety fostered by the recollection of my past infidelities, together with the meditation on my past life lived in disorder and abominations, sometimes gave me such grief that my body itself was affected. I had become very thin and despondent, although my health remained good (p. 139).

These reflections fill me with sorrow. I left the world in order to seek God, renounce vanity and save my soul. Is it possible that I merely changed my ambition and that I preserved that ambition all the while in my heart? If so, of what use was it to undertake that work? (p. 148).

*Although the soul enjoys great pleasures in this state, this does not prevent it from feeling great interior sorrows. One such comes from past sins, staying day and night, never leaving* (p. 163).

How long would this purification of the senses and spirit last? He made the retreat for tonsure in August 1702, and the 'eighteen months of fervour' (Writings, 138) are to be dated from that. On the other hand, we know that at Christmas 1704 the Spirit of counsel drove him



to make a retreat and consult a spiritual director to submit his way of relating to God to Church authority. According to Le Floch (304) it was at the latter's request, Canon Simon Gourdan, that M. des Places wrote his 'Reflections on the Past', to let him see what was going on in his soul. This leaves a period of dryness of about seven months. This interview already brought him freedom, so that he could write:

**Filled with this holy confidence through the grace of God, I shall therefore examine which road is the shorter one, without henceforth being concerned over what is more agreeable to nature, in order to regain him without whom, whatever I do, I cannot live in peace (p. 147).**

As a result of this retreat he decided to advance to Orders and was ordained priest on 17 September 1707. The saintly Canon Gourdan became a friend and counsellor until Claude's death (Writings, 286). Everything leads us to believe that calm and peace settled into Claude's soul and allowed him to recapture his union with God amid the activities and cares of his ever-growing community. Life in the seminary as known through the rule is the best and only document we can look at for knowing Poullart's progress during his last years. The details of the rule which Fr des Places was the first to practise emphasize prayer, humility, love of the poor, preparation for death. Weakened by the hard winter of 1709 and all the cares of difficult times, weakened likewise by mortification and penance, Fr des Places had no resistance to pleurisy and an intestinal infection which came on him at the end of the year. At the height of his illness, he had to suffer with the moving of the seminary from one house to another; for want of place or patronage he could not get into hospital. In the midst of these sufferings, he never ceased to repeat verses two and three of psalm 84 (83):

**How my soul yearns and pines for Yahweh's courts! My heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God. (Besnard, quoted by Michel, p. 241).**

It was the death of a poor man and a friend of the poor, on 2 October 1709. His funeral was very simple, and his body was laid in a common grave in the cemetery of St-Etienne's church.

In this life-experience, what riches and what witness has he who was at the origin of our Congregation left us?

## a) AS A PERSONALITY

It is not chance that Fr Thomas's Memorandum consecrates more than half its pages (14 out of 24) to describing Fr des Places' spiritual life; he was a *spiritual person* led by the Spirit (CS 10, p. 10). He did not theorize, he lived. He is more witness than master. It was by the truth of his faith, the ardour of his love for God and the commitment of his charity that he was the guide of his first disciples and can still be ours on many points.

1) *Union with God:*

*God gave himself to him, and illuminated him more brilliantly than the greatest masters could their disciples* (Writings, p. 252).

*He regretted having begun so late to love a God who so deserved to be loved* (Writings, p. 254).

His prayer (for he was a man of prayer) was nourished on the Bible, was trinitarian (Writings, p. 258). Three personal aspects nourished this union with God, sometimes one at a time, sometimes all together: the Passion and despoiling of Jesus crucified; the merciful goodness of the forgiving Father; a sacramental life centered in delicacy and depth on the Eucharist, as betrayed love calling for our unreserved gift (Writings, p. 264). This union with God allowed him to unify without dichotomy the Lord's command, 'You will love your neighbour as yourself for love of God'. He is very modern on this point. Poullart's life shows no flight from the human reality; his apostolic activity exhibits a maximum of God in a maximum of the human being.

2) *Service of the poor in God:*

Poullart des Places's service of the poor flowed from his union with God and appeared rather as an act of love of God extending into an apostolate or humanitarian action in the flesh. It was the supernatural motivation of a person who lived in God and for God. The phrase 'service of the poor' also expresses the Christological character of this service of people as suffering members of Christ (Writings, p. 268).

It is said that human maturity is a help to the faith and the faith is a help to human maturity. In the first part of his life we can fancy that his culture and human maturity gave the faith a chance to grow, but in the second part, after his 'second conversion', it was undoubtedly the faith which gave a chance to his human maturity to free itself from shackles and arrive at calmness in God. This observation is equally verified in Libermann in a striking fashion, not only in his psychic balance but even in his physical health (LS IV 325-7).

From the time of his experiments with the little chimney-sweeps until the last moments of his life, Poullart expressed his love for God in this love of the poor. He lived intensely this association with Christ suffering, Christ poor. If it were not for the intensity of love which he put into this service, then his mortifications, his sacrifices of money and food which he imposed on himself for the suffering members of Jesus Christ, would easily seem exaggerated. The rule (185, 187; Writings 202) stipulated that the infirmarian would encourage the sick to bear their sufferings 'for love of Jesus' and that he would serve them 'as if they were Jesus Christ himself'. Just as in his friend Grignon, Claude Poullart's interior life burst forth on a dynamism of person for person, the dynamism of the apostle towards active and salvific insertion in the world (Papasogli, o.c. 199).

### 3) *Spiritual poverty*: (self-emptying and availability to the Spirit)

All the successive choices of Poullart des Places's spiritual journey took place in the direction of a shedding of his ambition, vanity, passion for glory, worldliness, lustre of degrees, money, even a self-effacement in his charge as director of a seminary (cf. rules concerning the superior); and all this was in order to become available to the Holy Spirit. We have seen how Poullart des Places used to pray twice daily that God would let him know his will, how he verified with his spiritual director his desire to gather his students into one house. His feeling of unworthiness and his hesitation about receiving the sacrament of Orders would pose a problem were it not for the loving delicacy and authentic spiritual poverty which never failed to the end<sup>1</sup>. Others in

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<sup>1</sup> Among the reasons for his hesitation was the fear that the passion for glory and honour would arise again in him as a preacher. 'If I agreed to become a priest on condition of never preaching' (Choice of a State of Life, p. 100).



that situation would have been worried about those they were leaving behind or about a successor. Poullart was satisfied to pray psalm 84 (83): 'My heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God'. He kept to the essentials: direct union with Christ and fidelity in peace to the Holy Spirit.

#### b) AS FOUNDER

Poullart des Places was the victim of this 'spiritual poverty', even in the eyes of people, for long after his death. Were it not for the difficulties of Archbishop Le Roy with the Council of State in 1901 and of the controversial Fr Le Floch with the 1906 edition of Claude's biography, our first founder might be still a shadowy figure today. *And that is the episode we should never forget* (Mgr. Le Roy, Archives C.S.Sp. 1928). God's providence, which does not forget its faithful servants, brought him back to our veneration in the course of history. It was only in 1919 that the General Chapter of the Holy Ghost Congregation declared that 'the founder of the Congregation is Claude Francis Poullart des Places', that 'the Venerable Francis Mary Paul Libermann is honoured as its second founder and spiritual father', that 'both have right to our filial veneration; without the one we would not have been, without the other we would not still be' (Michel, p. 346).

#### 1) *A lasting imprint and spirit:*

This 'spiritual poverty' made Poullart des Places quite simply available and docile to the Holy Spirit, who wished the Holy Ghost Seminary to exist. 'Spiritual poverty' was Poullart des Places's strength for leaving a lasting imprint and a spirit which continued on in this work, which he founded at the age of 24 and directed for only six years. It is the best monument to his short and holy life. This Holy Ghost Seminary, which was answering the wishes of the Council of Trent and also the poverty-situation of the student seminarians of the time, was one of the few foundations to have survived for 145 years (1703-1848) until the arrival of its eleventh superior general, Fr Libermann. In the light of history, with the financial means that Poullart left at his death, with the difficulties to find a successor, with the successive crises of the French Revolution, this survival is hardly explicable. The Holy Spirit had seen to it.

The fruits that the seminary bore over these 145 years also enable

us to measure the tree's strength, the lasting imprint and spirit that Poullart had put into his work. This imprint was not in the laws, nor embedded in the concrete of material restraints or organization, but flowed from his remarkable life-experience. Not one of the past students of the seminary took the Revolutionary oath with exemplary fidelity to the Church. More than 1500 missionaries trained in Holy Ghost Seminary were sent to the isolated and abandoned posts of the colonies in these 145 years. The first contacts between the 'Spiritans' of Poullart des Places and the Church of New France go back to 1732, with the arrival of Fr Frison de la Mothe in Quebec seminary. Down to 1791, twenty-two 'Spiritans' came to North America to serve as professors, parish priests or missionaries in Acadia (Albert David, C.S.Sp., Holy Ghost Seminary and the Missions of New France in the 18th century; in **Recherches Historiques**, vol. 35; 1929; 277-319). The Rules and Constitutions of 1734, twenty-five years after his death, codified this still-liveng spirit of Poullart from unwritten regulations and customs established in his lifetime or after his death. Only the explicit mention of 'the evangelization of those without the faith' was new, and even that, according to Le Floch, was based on the theme of the Lucan text (4 : 18), 'proclaim the good news to the poor', which Poullart des Places and his twelve companions had prayed on the vigil of the foundation, Pentecost 1703.

## 2) *The foundation charism:*

I find the distinction made by Fr Roger Tillard between the founder's charism and the foundation charism clarifying for understanding our two founders better. Here is how he describes foundation charism:

*Someone has the inspiration of a 'foundation' and receives from the Spirit the graces needed to realize it. But this inspiration does not necessarily come from a private spiritual vision, from a great mystical perception one wishes others to share. Very often, on the contrary, it is simply question of noting a need to be met, the discovery of a void nothing is filling. And, in the light of the gospel, one feels compelled to incarnate the precept of charity into that situation. Then one gathers men or women inflamed with love of the gospel and gives them a rule. . . . As for the more properly spiritual or mystical vision nourishing the evangelical form of existence that one gives the group, it is*

*often drawn from a prominent spiritual current or devotion of the time.*

*The 'foundation' shines forth more than the person who gave rise to it. . . . The grace of this 'inspired' person, 'his charism', will have been to allow a group to appear that the Church or society needed. (J.M.R. Tillard, O.P., **The Dynamism of Foundations**, in *Vocations*, no. 295, July 1981).*

This foundation charism died with Poullart. But, according to the image of the Body (I Cor 12: 13-19), the Congregation of the Holy Ghost, renewing itself ceaselessly and answering new needs, owes it to itself today to answer the needs of the Church of our time, in fidelity to Poullart's charism. It is always a re-foundation (I/D 36, 2-4). As well as the rich witness of his life, Claude Poullart implanted a spirit in his seminary which marked with lasting imprint several generations of apostolic workers. And many treasures of our Spiritan tradition in expressions like 'one heart and one soul' (Letter of Fr Lanoë, 6 November 1784), availability 'parati ad omnia' (Rules and Constitutions of 1734), 'towards the abandoned posts' (Patent Letters of 1726) might surprise some people by the date of their origin.

In the order of the historical continuity of Poullart's foundation, as well as in its providential development, Poullart des Places had to be what he was and do what he did. From 1703 to our own day we can follow a guide-line of thought and action. No one better than Libermann expressed this reality, this transition from the implicit to the explicit:

**When the Holy Spirit inspires a work, he hardly ever gives its development from the start, but only as occasion offers. Nevertheless, all the time all the development was contained in the principle by which he led him in whom he inspired the work, and there is a certain connection running through all that diversity. (ND III 158; 18 February 1842) (Same idea in: ND XII 133-4; 23 March 1850).**

Before God Libermann was to be the one who would undertake the 'development'. We acknowledge him as eleventh superior general and second founder or restorer. His personality and mark entered the Congregation to enrich the heritage and spirit of our religious family, heirs and successors that we are of a double tradition.





Claude-François POULLART DES PLACES  
(1679-1709)

## TWO FACES. . . ONE SPIRIT!

by Alphonse Gilbert, cssp

*I took a moment to look at their two faces,  
the faces of our fathers in the faith:  
the face of Francis at forty years of age,  
the face of Claude at twenty-eight,  
in their vestments as priests:  
two very different men!. . .*

*The son of a poor rabbi, the son of a rich bourgeois,  
a Jew according to the gospel, a Christian of Breton stock;  
the first moulded by sickness, the second bursting with youth,  
the one more highly strung, the other more sanguine. . .*

*And yet so close although a hundred years apart.  
Two beings marked by the Absolute of God,  
two persons indwelt by the same Love,  
love of God and love of humankind,  
two persons no more belonging to themselves  
for they have given all,  
two faces radiating kindness,  
mercy, gentleness, compassion,  
because God's will is done in them,  
because God's will is done by them,  
at the service of the lowliest and most abandoned,  
here and beyond the seas,  
the nearest of the furthest,  
sent to the poor, with a poor man's heart,  
like Jesus poor!*

*Schooled in suffering and rejoicing in hope,  
men of God and men of action,  
men of solitude and community-builders,  
men of learning and men of faith,  
priests of Jesus Christ and educators of priests,  
apostles and fathers of apostles,  
burning with the fire of love,  
and the longing that the world would burn as well  
with love diffused by the Holy Spirit,  
who is the Spirit of Love,  
Love in Person,  
Infinite Love! . .*

*Their lifelong dream  
was to surrender to the Spirit,  
be led by him,  
the Spirit of Pentecost,  
Breath of life,  
Inspirer of missionaries,  
like Mary  
and with Mary,  
wrapped in the tenderness of her heart;  
the same call, same zeal, same mystique!  
Our fathers in the faith have only one heart and one soul.  
In the ways of Providence they are one,  
joined in the Spirit of Love. . .*

*One powerful sap pervades the ancient Spiritan tree,  
that a graft regenerates. . .*

*The two faces have one voice:  
**PLACE YOUR FOOTSTEPS IN OURS!***





François-Marie-Paul LIBERMANN  
(1802-1852)

# I – FATHER LIBERMANN'S SPIRITUALITY

by Bernard Tenailleau, Cssp.

In a long letter of spiritual direction to M. Dupont, a seminarian of Saint Sulpice, on 9 August 1841, Fr Libermann remarks:

**One must never say: I like this particular system of spirituality, it seems just made for me, so it must be true. A prayerful life, a grace of the Holy Spirit and long experience are needed for these things, a practical rather than a speculative knowledge<sup>1</sup>.**

This seems to me a completely sane remark with which to introduce the reflection *on the spirituality of Fr Libermann, our second founder*. Even if it is important to locate the key-concepts of a spirituality, it must never be forgotten that behind any spirituality whatever there is always a source-experience, that is, a lived experience of the workings of holiness, lived by one or several witnesses, of which the conceptual statement can give only an imperfect grasp<sup>2</sup>.

So first I will look at Libermannian spirituality in its origins — the source-experience; then I will analyse the key-concepts of Libermannian spirituality.

## I – LIBERMANNIAN SPIRITUALITY IN ITS ORIGINS

**'God gave me everything, he drew me without by-your-leave, and with a violence I have never yet perceived in anyone up to now'<sup>3</sup>.**

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<sup>1</sup> To M. Dupont 9 August 1842. N.D. III, 267.

<sup>2</sup> L. Cognet. 'Les problèmes de la spiritualité'. Cerf 1967. p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> To J. Schwindenhammer 3 August 1846. N.D. VIII, 203.

## A – LIBERMANN AND THE EXPERIENCE OF HOLINESS

1) *Libermann was 'seized' by God.*

The starting-point of Libermann's Christian spiritual experience is the decisive moment of his conversion in October 1826. Somewhat after the fashion of St Paul, Libermann experienced a sudden conversion, to the extent that he felt literally 'seized' by God. I will not give the details of Jesus' sudden bursting into Libermann's life, you know the account of his conversion. I only want to emphasize the element of suddenness in the conversion and also the force of God's taking-over, both then and in later years. This is important for understanding one of the characteristics of Libermann's spiritual experience, his willing availability in the hands of God, even unto mystical passivity. To the age of twenty, Libermann had lived his Judaism with much depth of conviction within the closed atmosphere of the Saverne ghetto. His stay at Metz for rabbinical studies induced an interior crisis in the young Libermann, opening him to the world of his time, and by reaction plunging him into a religious indifference which came close to unbelief. He wrote to his older brother, Samson, now a Catholic, whose conversion Libermann could not understand:

**I no longer believe in the Bible... How absurd to believe all those biblical fables... We say that God chose the Jewish people to give them the holy laws. How can these holy laws be explained, or this choice?... It matters little whether I be Jew or Christian as long as I adore God, whether in one person or three. Nevertheless, I assure you I would not be a better Christian than I am a good Jew<sup>4</sup>.**

When his rabbinical studies were finished, Libermann was preoccupied by one haunting question: will he or will he not become a rabbi, now that his Jewish faith is so unstable, not to say shaky? A friend advised him to go to Paris to meet David Drach, the former rabbi now converted. This was October 1826. Events took a quick turn.

After a short visit to his father at Saverne, who discerned nothing of his son's interior turmoil, Libermann went to Paris and found himself left at Stanislas College to do some reflection. Alone there, far

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<sup>4</sup> To Dr. S. Libermann 6 January 1826. N.D. I, 52-55.



from his own people, a prey to deep sadness, Jacob Libermann threw himself on his knees and poured out the most ardent supplication to the God of his fathers, imploring light on the true religion:

**The Lord, who is near to those who call on him from the bottom of their heart, heard my prayer. Immediately, I was enlightened, I saw the truth, the faith penetrated my mind and heart. . . From this moment I desired nothing so much as to see myself plunged in the sacred font<sup>5</sup>.**

Seized by Christ, Libermann would remain forever marked by this initial encounter, which would lead him to find again the best in Jewish spirituality, namely, not only God's transcendence but also the loving closeness of a God who acts and saves. Later on, the French school of spirituality would help him better to see the loving closeness of God in his life, but the initial experience would always be the determining element. When Libermann said, 'God is all'<sup>6</sup>, the affirmation would be rooted in his experience with its decisive first moment, his conversion.

## 2) *The incomprehensible ways of sickness.*

It is not possible to follow Christ Jesus without having to lose oneself<sup>7</sup>. Francis Libermann would soon have to live this self-denuding experience, by means of a trial he did not choose, *his sickness, an occasion of holiness for him*. It is not possible for God to become 'everything' in someone's life without that person abandoning 'everything' to him. Libermann's self-denuding would not go through a programmed asceticism; events themselves, in their incomprehensible way, would carry him along and become steps in his union with God. In continuity with the gratuitous suddenness of his conversion, we will find Libermann aware of a God who acts and overthrows<sup>8</sup>. Libermann's experience is *based on what happens*, in typical biblical fashion. This has to be emphasized if we want to understand why Libermann insists so much on interior peace, abandonment into the hands of God, patient waiting, and the necessary self-denuding. The events of life

<sup>5</sup> Conversion. N.D. I, 65-66.

<sup>6</sup> 31 January 1852. N.D. XIII, 659.

<sup>7</sup> Mc. 8, 34-35.

<sup>8</sup> To M. Cahier 25 May 1838. L.Sp. I, 517.

will dictate these. He often said that the best mortifications are not those we choose but those that life offers us<sup>9</sup>.

Having entered Saint Sulpice seminary in 1827, Libermann was waiting for the subdiaconate, which he was to receive in 1829. Despite some nervous twitches, his health had held good so far. An attack of nerves, stronger than the others, happened on the very eve of ordination; the nervous twitches had developed into epileptic crises, clearly diagnosable. The gate to the priesthood was closed to him. After ups and downs, the sickness became controlled leaving him free to be ordained priest in 1841. But it was a long trial, lasting over twelve years. Not wishing to dismiss him from the seminary, the Sulpician Fathers found a place for him in the Issy community, at the bursar's service. He left to be novice-master for the Eudists in 1837. But the sickness was never far away, since in 1838 he had a severe attack in front of the whole community. Later on, after founding his Congregation, his nerves continued to give him trouble in the shape of migraine and nervous tics. Moreover, other health problems in the liver and stomach gave him suffering to the end. He died in 1852, scarcely fifty.

Epilepsy is an agonizing trial, with depressive consequences that can lead to suicide. Libermann felt the pull to suicide very strongly. Besides, epilepsy has also a humiliating aspect in that it can come on without warning, when one is in company. After a major attack he said to the novices at Rennes:

**God wanted you to see what a poor person you have as director<sup>10</sup>.**

This sickness blocked all future hopes. Even in 1840 at Rome he did not know how events would develop for him. *In the depths of this trial Libermann practised abandonment in peace and confidence.* The self-denuding had to go very far, he had to trust in God without worrying about the way God would lead him. Moreover, with this unclear horizon Libermann was at the service of others. Thanks to his influence, devotional groups flourished at Saint Sulpice and Issy, of which he was the leader. The Issy period, even if the possibility of priesthood was temporarily removed, was rich in activity and would

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<sup>9</sup> To M. Aubriot 28 November 1838. L.Sp. II, 36.

<sup>10</sup> Deposition of M. Mangot. N.D. I, 522.

lead him to Rennes in 1837 as novice-master of the Eudists. His first spiritual letters date from this Sulpician period.

But at the same time as the sickness was making inroads into his health, *God's hold was getting stronger on him*. Libermann would admit this much later, in a spiritual letter of 3 August 1846 to the young Jerome Schwindenhammer, then a student at La Neuville. The facts referred to pertain to the Issy period.

**I will say a word about myself, on condition that you tell no one... Certainly it is grace alone which has strengthened what was feeble and rectified what was defective. So clear and true is this that if I became an unbeliever my mind would never be able to deny the existence and action of grace in my soul... In short, nothing in me by way of knowledge in the intelligence, will-power, or the practice of virtue, has been acquired. Our Lord gave me the grace to stand up to my father, who wanted to snatch me from the faith. I renounced him rather than the faith. After that, our good Master came unexpectedly to snatch me from myself and held my faculties absorbed and captive for about five years... My whole preoccupation was to be with him, and that came very easy<sup>11</sup>.**

So in this seminary period Libermann experienced God strongly and was praying affectively — a point he would often come back to with his novices and missionaries<sup>12</sup>. But in this rich prayer-experience he also knew dryness and desolation. We know his comment after a big feast-day:

**I felt stupid all day long, unable to talk to God, to think or feel anything<sup>13</sup>.**

And Fr Millault, parish priest of Saint Roche in Paris, and former companion of Libermann, gave this testimony:

*In the midst of the greatest desolations he maintained a deep peace, and he often told me that, in order to avoid discouragement he would look on this pressure on his soul as happening in*

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<sup>11</sup> To J. Schwindenhammer 3 August 1846. N.D. VIII, 202-204.

<sup>12</sup> To M. Douay 31 December 1841. N.D. III, 88.

<sup>13</sup> Deposition of M. Perrée. N.D. I, 308.



*someone else; then, in peace, he would admire God's leading activity in a thought of humble submission*<sup>14</sup>.

### 3) *His stay at Rennes and the trial of the dark night.*

Francis Libermann left the Issy seminary in 1837 to go and take charge of the Eudist novitiate at Rennes. His spiritual director encouraged him, as it gave hope for his future and hope of becoming a priest. But God was waiting for him there, as he once waited for Jacob at the ford of the Jabbok, with a new struggle, still more difficult than that of sickness. *Rennes was to become the purifying crucible of the night of the spirit.* In practice, after the Issy seminary, where everything was organized and thus offered security, Libermann found a quite small Congregation which had been decimated by the French Revolution and was trying to recuperate. The members could be counted on one hand. Everything had to start from the start<sup>15</sup>. Fr Louis de la Morinière, the superior, began by ranking Francis Libermann with the novices. Only later would Fr Louis acknowledge Libermann as counsellor and spiritual director, but without giving him the necessary authority, since he retained the title of master of novices himself. In correspondence with the young Paul Carron, a sick seminarian and former companion, Libermann lifts the veil from time to time on what was going on within him. He felt Fr Louis was on his guard against him. With the novices he got tongue-tied. He felt that his words as spiritual director were getting nowhere<sup>16</sup>. To top it all, his sickness returned brutally in humiliating circumstances. Then the young deacon he had set his hopes on, Alexander de Brandt, became arrogant and dissipated, affecting disdain for the novitiate spiritual director; Libermann had no more control over him and feared the worst for the others. He experienced an almost obsessive overwhelming sense of his own uselessness. The death-wish haunted him. Even more, he was assailed by the thought of being rebuked and rejected by God.

This avalanche of trials, which could have led to a nervous breakdown, would become a path to mystical purification. In actual fact, nobody around him sensed what he was going through. He remained

<sup>14</sup> Deposition of M. Millault. N.D. I, 176.

<sup>15</sup> To M. De Goy 4 December 1838. L.Sp. II, 132-133.

<sup>16</sup> To M. Carbon 15 December 1839. N.D. I, 674-676.

all smiles, all kindness and attention to others. He got through an extraordinary amount of work in his capacity as master of novices, he conducted an enormous correspondence and he followed the ordinary community time-table. This letter of his to Paul Carron, a sick seminarian, could fit the situation.

**Walk on in the darkness of Jesus' cross. You were enjoying his divine light in a tangible way. . . Now is the dark night of the cross, of privations, of interior darkness, where the senses play no part and are as dead. This is the moment to live by faith, a faith full of hope. Stand before God, let him work out his good pleasure in you, in the midst of all the interior darkness and unclarity<sup>17</sup>.**

I cannot come close to God or enter into deep union with him without going through the purification of the dark night. Libermann came to know the dark night of the spirit at Rennes. In 1840, immediately after leaving Rennes, he set out for Rome to have his plan for the Work of the Blacks approved. Humanly speaking, the situation was still more difficult than at Rennes, but we are seeing another Libermann, transformed by the purifying dark night. From the end of the Rennes period Libermann was anchored into the Father's love and into union with his Son Jesus, to such an extent that nothing could shake him now. The instrument was now ready to give of its best in the foolishness of a foundation in which everything from the outset looked contrary to reason.

When we look at this purifying time of Rennes (1836-1839) we find again the same experience of a God who is 'everything', and who acts through events, in a way that can sometimes be crucifying. Confronted with this mysterious sanctifying action of God, the only possible attitude is total abandonment of self in the greatest peace. Likewise we find his insistence on interior availability, with the only activity within our power, selfdenial — something he emphasized in this Rennes period. Libermann sees grace for receiving, not for grasping; holiness is not a conquest but a gift; the point is to give in to God's action, or to leave oneself available and manageable, so that the transforming union that God wants to lead his disciple to can start and be accomplished. This explains why self-denial looms large in Liber-

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<sup>17</sup> To M. Carron 15 June 1839. L.Sp. II, 265-266.

mann, the first obstacle to holiness is ourselves. But this self-denial must take place in peace and interior abandonment, in patience, serenity and expectancy, so that God's sanctifying and liberating activity can be unrestrained<sup>18</sup>. In Libermann himself, the attitude of interior availability in gentleness, peace and abandonment was the more remarkable for the difficulty of the trials he underwent. But the Lord fashioned not only a saint out of Libermann but a founder, whose disciples we are.

### B – LIBERMANN HAD A FOUNDER'S CHARISM

#### 1) *The mystic, God's workmanship, becomes a founder.*

The realization of holiness, from the fact that it is lived out within the People of God, has to have ecclesial repercussions. This is where the Holy Spirit's charismatic action enters, with different vocations. Among the charisms Libermann received (that of spiritual director in particular<sup>19</sup>) one is proper to him and influenced his spiritual progress, *the charism of being a founder*. One of the points about a founder is that he can attract disciples. Furthermore, a founder's holiness becomes 'typical', a model. In practice, the missionary call of 1840 and the founding of the Holy Heart of Mary Congregation were a turning-point for Libermann. The path of holiness was taking an apostolic direction, the details of his previous spiritual experience were adding an apostolic dimension.

*The year 1840, including his stay in Rome*, was the great maturing year, before the launching of the new foundation. Libermann's procedure was uniform. Confronted with a God who acts and calls, the only response was total availability. On leaving Rennes, he was sure of God's will; but the internal criterion of fidelity to God's will was not enough, there was also the ecclesial criterion of obedience to the Church. So Libermann set out for Rome to introduce his plan for a missionary foundation, avoiding all that could smack of human strategy. He 'received' his missionary vocation from God, now he wanted to 'receive' it from the Church, since it was a question of an apostolic

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<sup>18</sup> To M. Cahier 10 June 1838. L.Sp. I, 537-538.

<sup>19</sup> To J. Schwindenhammer 21 June 1846. N.D. VIII, 177-178.

vocation. Throughout his whole stay in Rome, he would remain at peace, despite months of waiting, for he wrote the Provisional Rule, an explanation, and the Commentary on St John's Gospel. At the end of 1840 the last obstacles fell. He was able to become a priest, and the foundation, encouraged by Rome, found a bishop-protector. Libermann saw God's will clearly, he would give his life for the Work of the Blacks.

A period of *prodigious activity* began for him, to last the rest of his life. We cannot enter into the details of the steps of Libermann's work as founder, it would take us too far afield. Suffice to mention some key-dates.

- 1841: ordination to the priesthood and opening of first novitiate.
- 1842: foundations in Bourbon and Haiti.
- 1843: first departures for Guinea with Bishop Barron.
- 1845: new set of missionaries for Guinea; foundation in Australia.
- 1846: Memorandum to Propaganda Fide on evangelization of Africa.
- 1847: Bishop Truffet appointed Bishop of Two Guineas.
- 1848: merger with Holy Ghost Congregation.
- 1849: appointment of two new bishops for Guinea; drawing up of second Rule.
- 1850: reorganization of ecclesiastical hierarchy in French colonies.
- 1851: 'Instructions to Missionaries'.
- 1852: his death.

Nor must we forget the countless difficulties which cropped up from start to finish. Faced with failures, trials and contradictions, Libermann always reacted uniformly, that is to say, in peace, surrender and patient waiting. He tried to remain open to God's loving will. He wrote to Fr Le Vavas seur, a missionary in Bourbon, who was tempted to leave the young Congregation.

Since God placed me in this work I have never had a moment of peace and consolation, for my soul is blunted to all that could be pleasing and consoling to it, while it is extremely sensitive to pain, and the divine goodness has not spared me on that score. Think what crushing pain it has to be not to have a moment, a minute, in the day to think of the salvation of my soul, and yet you know well that my most burning and continual desires draw me towards retreat and solitude. With such great horror of being in contact with the world, I have a repugnance, almost insurmountable, to doing just that, and yet I must. I have great



difficulty in conversing with people, and I must be at it all the time... It seems that everything in me is opposed to my staying in the state of things where I am. Nevertheless, I would regard it as a crime even to entertain the thought. God binds and chains me to this work — crucifying, but dear to my heart... I submit with a full heart to the divine will which binds and pinions me so vigorously<sup>20</sup>.

## 2) *Libermann's Apostolic Holiness.*

As founder of an apostolic Congregation Libermann now had to offer a way of holiness to his disciples, who were missionaries. The Rule, letters and 'Instructions to Missionaries' contain most of his teaching. But he was not satisfied with offering a way of holiness, *he was himself a living witness*, whether in the novitiate at La Neuville, in Holy Ghost Seminary, or in his dealings with the missionaries. Here are some characteristics of Libermann's apostolic holiness, found not only in his thought but in his life.

We have seen that Libermann's first spiritual experience was that of *God taking hold of him*. This active presence of the Lord would continue to be felt all along in the missionary foundation. Once again, events would be the prime indication of God's activity. Libermann would confront them, however difficult, in peace and confidence. Suffice to remember the failure of the first foundation in Guinea and the countless difficulties involved, so great that Bishop Kobès himself in 1851 was all but discouraged. Over and above much practical advice, Libermann invited his confreres to develop an ever-growing apostolic holiness. This would be based on a self-denuding which could be a veritable immolation, for the apostle's holiness touches more than himself, it concerns those to whom he is sent<sup>21</sup>.

In this requirement of holiness, *Jesus Christ holds a central position* as model and source. Nourished on the French school of spirituality, Libermann knew about de Bérulle's theology of Christ's 'states'. Speaking to his missionaries, he insisted on the apostolic aspect of Christ's life above all — this is the 'state' Jesus wants to live in us.

<sup>20</sup> To Fr. Le Vavas seur 28 January 1846. N.D. VIII, 29-30.

<sup>21</sup> To Mgr. Kobès 1 November 1851. N.D. XIII, 352.

**Jesus sends us as he was sent. Our mission is his; it is Jesus who lives in those he sends, who suffers in them, who draws souls to God his Father and gives them graces through them<sup>22</sup>.**

To enter into Christ's apostolic holiness, *prayer is of great importance*, meditation in particular. Prayer 'maintains our soul in an outlook of faith and disposes our heart for loving'<sup>23</sup>. But the missionary's way of praying cannot be exactly the same as the contemplative's. Libermann had read St John of the Cross, he knew the debates about acquired and infused prayer. But he distrusted systematizations<sup>24</sup> and preferred to keep to concrete experience, whether his own or what he perceived in others' hearts. This means that his teaching on prayer is hard to classify and, in any case, would suit anyone involved in missionary and apostolic life. Thus, for example, Libermann often speaks of prayer of affection<sup>25</sup>. He does not mean purely prayer that can be sensed. It is shot through, at least from time to time, by flashes of light which give it a more directly mystical bent. Moreover, he thinks of prayer — especially the missionary's — as something extremely simple.

**Mental prayer is an important business but a very simple business. . . It should consist in a repose which is simple, peaceful and full of confidence before our Lord; that is all. There is no need to look for lots of reflections or produce lots of acts of the will. Nothing must be forced on your part. Stand before Jesus like a poor destitute child before his father, nothing more. . . Stand before him with the simple desire to be at his service. Be content with a glance of your soul towards him, from time to time, with that intention<sup>26</sup>.**

At the same time as he advocates a simple prayer, Libermann insists also on what he calls '*practical union*'. Actually the missionary's whole life must be united to Christ.

**In order that Jesus may live in those he sends, and work everything in and through them, they in turn must live in him, be united with him in their life, sufferings and apostolic activity<sup>27</sup>.**

<sup>22</sup> Instructions to the missionaries 1851. E.Sp. 374.

<sup>23</sup> Instructions to the missionaries 1851. E.Sp. 483.

<sup>24</sup> To M. Dupont 8 August 1842. N.D. III, 264-267.

<sup>25</sup> Spiritual writings 149-209 — 496-537.

<sup>26</sup> To M. Collin 29 January 1845. N.D. VII, 37-38.

<sup>27</sup> Instructions to the missionaries 1851. Spiritual Writings 374.

Prayer has a role to play in this, but also all the rest of life, which must be united to Christ. He insists a lot on this aspect of 'practical union', which puts the missionary's heart and life on God's wavelength. Likewise, 'practical union' involves self-denial, as a way of becoming a pliable instrument in God's hands. Basically, 'practical union' is nothing else but docility to the Holy Spirit, who teaches us how to watch over ourselves and presses us to work for the Kingdom, all in God's good time<sup>28</sup>. Besides, Libermann always sees God acting in what is going on, either in our own private lives or in the apostolate<sup>29</sup>.

Another characteristic of apostolic holiness, which Libermann often comes back to, is *fraternal charity* in a threefold application, to community life, apostolic zeal and commitment to the poor. The Rule's finest pages are consecrated to brotherly love, which Libermann says must be cordial, simple, open, frank, modest, respectful, pure, humble. . .<sup>30</sup>. Apostolic zeal must be nourished by a solid love of God and an insatiable thirst to proclaim the gospel<sup>31</sup>. Libermann sees the evangelization drive as inseparable from human commitment, all the more so that the choice of the Congregation is for the poorest and most abandoned. Libermann's 'humanity' for the poor is striking. It introduced a new element in his work for the African continent as the moment it was emerging from slavery. The Provisional Rule asked that the missionaries be 'the advocates, support and defenders of the weak and little against their oppressors'<sup>32</sup>. Libermann pushed this very far; he wanted his missionaries to 'make themselves Black with the Blacks'<sup>33</sup>.

Finally, Libermann views apostolic holiness as *inseparable from the Church*. Like all founders, Libermann was anxious to submit his own discernment to the Church's. It was for that he went to Rome in 1840. He would often return there, submitting his plans for evangelization. He often wrote to the Cardinal Prefect of Propaganda Fide. He asked his missionaries to be respectful to their bishops, and he thought of indigenous clergy from the start<sup>34</sup>. He did not hesitate to

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<sup>28</sup> Instructions to the missionaries 1851. Spiritual Writings 531-532.

<sup>29</sup> To the community of Dakar 19 November 1847. N.D. IX, 328-329.

<sup>30</sup> Provisory Rule 1840. N.D. II, 280-284.

<sup>31</sup> Provisory Rule 1840. N.D. II, 255.

<sup>32</sup> Provisory Rule 1840. N.D. II, 256.

<sup>33</sup> To the community of Dakar. 19 November 1846. N.D. IX, 330.

<sup>34</sup> Provisory Rule 1840. N.D. II, 253-254.

send his missionaries to different parts of the globe, for the apostolic spirit requires extending the Church's boundaries<sup>35</sup>. Likewise he was keenly persuaded that the Congregation was made to go to those whom nobody wanted. He made bold to say to his confreres that if we do not accept the last place we have no business in the Church<sup>36</sup>. Towards the end of Libermann's life tensions arose between the missionaries in Guinea and the Congregation. Libermann wrote to Fr Boulanger, appointed as general visitor:

**We must succeed in establishing union and even cohesion between the Guinea communities and ourselves. God's Spirit will be among us only on that condition. The missionaries in Guinea must not be Guinea partisans above all else; they must be partisans of God and the Church, then members of the Congregation to which God has given them and to which they are attached with all their heart's affection, and in this Congregation they are employed for the salvation of the souls in Guinea as long as they are there by God's will<sup>37</sup>.**

## II - THE KEY-CONCEPTS OF LIBERMANNIAN SPIRITUALITY

Oh, how I wish that all my dear confreres felt as strongly as I do the need of holiness in an African missionary. Be holy, then, as Jesus was holy, it is the one and only means of redeeming and sanctifying souls<sup>38</sup>.

### A - GOD BEFORE ALL

1) *'God is all, man is nothing'*<sup>39</sup>.

These were Libermann's last words, summarizing one of the great certitudes of his life: 'God is all, man is nothing'<sup>40</sup>. Libermann's

<sup>35</sup> To Fr. Le Vasseur. 10 March 1844. N.D. VI, 112.

<sup>36</sup> To the community of Bourbon. 21 August 1844. N.D. VI, 313.

<sup>37</sup> To M. Boulanger 13 November 1850. N.D. XII, 464-465.

<sup>38</sup> To M. Lairé. 8 May 1851. N.D. XIII, 144.

<sup>39</sup> 31 January 1852. N.D. XIII, 659.

<sup>40</sup> 31 January 1852. N.D. XIII, 659.



anthropology is radically theocentric. Human beings, apart from God, are nothing. They can become everything if they let themselves be lived in and led by him who is 'all'. There is no place whatever for an anthropocentrism in Libermann. God is at the centre of life. To leave that perspective, which puts the mystery of God in the first place, is to condemn oneself to misunderstanding everything. This insistence on the priority of God was rooted in the fact of his conversion. His Jewish experience itself, which withered before the spiritual crisis of Metz, flowered again in its best elements. Libermann had meditated Holy Scripture sufficiently in his youth to know God's transcendence and greatness. Likewise, the French school of spirituality, which he would discover at Saint Sulpice, would help him to formulate this theocentrism. *But its real source was in his own experience of God.* No spiritual life is possible, according to Libermann, without giving God first place. Over and again he would say to seminarians who confided in him, even though he was not a priest: 'God alone, God alone, always God alone. . . God alone must be seen in everything'<sup>41</sup>. Both by creation and grace we are radically dependent on God. What matters it to accept this relationship, to let it rule us in such a way that God is truly all in all. The teaching on selfdenial, which Libermann insists on so much, is based on the recognition that God's love goes before us.

The stress on the priority of God must not lead us to believe that all the rest is unimportant. On the contrary, Libermann makes it clear that *human values are important*, in as much as they rely on the true source, which is God. He underwent a development about this point. Before 1840 his world was that of the seminary and seminarians, and he always considered himself a seminarian. His insistence on the priority of God would find expression in terms concerning flight from the world. He held, 'God is God', the rest was only 'nothing'<sup>42</sup>. Later on, in the years of the missionary foundation, his point of view still remained theocentric, but now the choice for God was lived, above all, at the service of missionary work. It was for God that the missionaries would go and settle down among the poorest, not only to baptize them but also to help them to rise on the human scale. Libermann was no longer looking for flight from the world but, on the contrary,

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<sup>41</sup> To M. Mangot 8 July 1836. L.Sp. I, 153. N.D. I, 274.

<sup>42</sup> To M. Viot 16 october 1830. L.Sp. I, 16-18.

apostolic commitment, so that the gospel might be proclaimed as the good news of liberation (the human aspect) and of salvation (the supernatural aspect)<sup>43</sup>.

2) *'God drew me without asking my permission'*<sup>44</sup>.

Not only is God at the centre, but he is a living partner, who intervenes in our history. What happened formerly among the Jewish people goes on happening today in the Church. Libermann's God is the God of salvation-history, whose supreme moment was the coming of Christ. There is no hope of finding a metaphysical vision of God in Libermann. The work of salvation is what is primary. So Libermann's God is *a God who acts in our lives*, making communication with us through what goes on. This understanding of God's activity as taking place through the events of life is very important. It gives a particular colouring to all of Libermann's life, whether in the time of the seminary or later at the time of the missionary foundation. In practice Libermann lived under God's gratuitous and unforeseeable activity in a concrete way, in the form of being taken hold of by God, whose embrace he felt at the moment of his conversion and later on during the years of his sickness<sup>45</sup>. In 1845 when Fr Le Vasseur wanted to leave the young Congregation in discouragement, Fr Libermann recalled again the constraint of God's will, which bound and tied him tight<sup>46</sup>.

Such an understanding of God's activity, based on events, necessarily influenced Libermann's spiritual attitude. He saw that God cannot be programmed, cannot be boxed into systems in which all the steps follow one another<sup>47</sup>. Likewise, God is not discovered in books, even if theological studies are important<sup>48</sup>. God is a living partner<sup>49</sup>, whom one welcomes and for whom one learns to wait in peace, patience and hope. How often would Libermann remind his missionaries to be on the alert for God's moments<sup>50</sup>. Similarly there is no

<sup>43</sup> To Fr. Le Vasseur 28 January 1846. N.D. VIII, 28-31.

<sup>44</sup> To J. Schwindenhammer 3 August 1846. N.D. VIII, 203.

<sup>45</sup> To J. Schwindenhammer 3 August 1846. N.D. VIII, 202-204.

<sup>46</sup> To Fr. Le Vasseur 28 January 1846. N.D. VIII, 30.

<sup>47</sup> To M. Dupont 9 August 1842. N.D. III, 265.

<sup>48</sup> To a priest 1837. L.Sp. II, 414-420. N.D. I, 454.

<sup>49</sup> To M. Cahier. 25 May 1838. L.Sp. I, 517.

<sup>50</sup> To the community of Dakar. 19 November 1847. N.D. IX, 328.

hope of finding a picture of a voluntarist type of holiness in Libermann, as if God was at the outcome of our efforts. The will has a place, certainly, it even has a priority over the mind, but only to dispose us for God's loving activity, since it is he who draws and transforms us.

**God vivifies us by his Holy Spirit and unites us to himself. On our part, we do nothing except dispose ourselves, and offer no resistance<sup>51</sup>.**

All this means that the fundamental attitude of those who would live in union with God, both in their own personal lives and in their apostolic work, would be always *an attitude of availability*, lived in surrender and peace, unperturbed, placing all one's trust in him who is all and can do all. Libermann's very asceticism makes sense from this point of view. The best mortifications are not those we select for ourselves but those we do not choose, those which come from God. As regards prayerful availability, it can lead to mystical passivity, whereby life becomes a continuous Yes to God's activity in us. Libermann lived this mystical passivity in a high degree<sup>52</sup>.

## B – CHRIST'S PRIMACY

### 1) '*Jesus is our only holiness and our only love*'<sup>53</sup>

God is all, says Fr Libermann, he has the right to everything, we must give him everything. He also affirms with equal force that *Christ is all*. He wrote to a seminarian in 1839:

**Be holy, my dear friend, as our Father and Master is holy. Jesus alone must be living and existing in you. As long as anything foreign to Jesus is there, you will not be holy. Jesus in our only holiness and love<sup>54</sup>.**

Libermann's theocentrism is Christological. God is given to us in Jesus, since Jesus in the well-beloved Son of the Father. Similarly,

<sup>51</sup> Instructions to the missionaries. 1851. E.Sp. 480.

<sup>52</sup> To M. Lannurien 3 October 1842. N.D. III, 295-298.

<sup>53</sup> To a seminarian. 1837. L.Sp. II, 399. N.D. I, 452.

<sup>54</sup> To a seminarian. 1837. L.Sp. II, 399. N.D. I, 452.

through Jesus we have access to the Father and we begin to share in the very life of God. Fr Le Vavassuer remarked about Fr Libermann:

**He is not greatly learned and he is not a great orator, but he has something more — Jesus' mind and life within him<sup>55</sup>.**

Almost all of Libermann's spiritual letters bear the mark of Christ's primacy. When he mentions God he usually gives the three divine Persons their privileged place in order, within the mystery of the Trinity. Likewise, in many letters which speak of 'God' Libermann is thinking directly of the Person of Christ<sup>56</sup>.

Once again, his conversion is at the origins of this Christocentrism, with Christ's sudden hold on him. At Saint-Sulpice, at Issy, and later at Rennes, Libermann would come in contact with the Fench school of spirituality, which would help him to fathom the mysteries of Christ and their place in the spiritual life. In words less abstract than de Berulle's, more careful than Olier's, and more subdued than St John Eudes's, *Libermann stressed the primacy of Christ, of the mystery of his Incarnation, and of salvation*. His Commentary on St John's Gospel, written in Rome in 1840, takes up the same Christological emphasis in depth, which marked Libermann's spiritual experience. Jesus is truly the way, the truth, and the life for him (Jn 14:6). Confronted with this Jesus, who draws us to himself and wishes to give us a share in his own life, we must surrender ourselves into his hands with the greatest availability<sup>57</sup>.

When founding his Congregation later on, Libermann would come back on this primacy of Christ, without which it is impossible to have access to the genuine life, that is to say, a sharing in the very life of God. Anxious to have his missionary confreres enter into a real union with Jesus Christ, he would insist a lot *on apostolic holiness*, which is not primarily an asceticism of holiness, even if self-denial is an absolutely necessary condition, but a holiness of assimilation to the likeness of Jesus' holiness<sup>58</sup>.

<sup>55</sup> 9 August 1950. N.D. XIV (complements) 152.

<sup>56</sup> To M. Delasorne. 19 September 1835. L.Sp. I, 123-130.

<sup>57</sup> Saint John's Commentary — second edition. PP. 327-328.

<sup>58</sup> Instructions to the missionaries. 1851. E.Sp. 374-376.



2) *'Jesus must be the soul of your soul'*<sup>59</sup>.

Christ's is an active presence in us. Not only does it draw us to himself and stabilize us in him, but it also has us enter into his activity. Libermann was not a sentimental quietist. The active primacy of Christ does not function without a difficult self-denial to every self-seeking. But if Jesus draws us to himself and gives us to drink of the living waters of his love, this is also to have us share in his own mission. Now this activity of Jesus takes on a particular configuration in us, because of what Jesus lived during his life on earth. In harmony with the French school of spirituality, Libermann insisted on the fact that Jesus wants to live his own life in us, with the 'states' that characterized that life<sup>60</sup>. In practice, we cannot be united to the Father without passing through the Mediator, who is Jesus, the Incarnate Word. Now, Jesus is Mediator not only in the supreme act of his paschal mystery but also by all his human life, which constitutes a unique wholeness, lived in sacrifice for us. As members of his Body, we carry the marks of his life, since he fashions us to his likeness. This is what Libermann explains to the young M. Clair in 1839:

**Do not rest satisfied with the desire of always thinking about the Lord Jesus, but add to that a great eager desire to possess him in your soul, so that you may have no more activity, feeling, wishes, affections, acts of will or points of view of your own, but that Jesus may be your life in everything, privately and socially. Then he will live in you in his spirit of holiness, in the fulness of his power, and he will outline the interior states of his own soul in you, which he wishes to make you share**<sup>61</sup>.

Further on in the same letter, he speaks clearly of the two great means for allowing the admirable Kingdom of Jesus to develop in us: a continual spirit of prayer and peace of soul<sup>62</sup>.

Later on, Libermann would speak to his missionaries again about sharing in the 'states' of Christ's life. He would insist less on the mystery of the Incarnation, which played a big part in his spirituality at Issy and Rennes, when he was living a hidden life himself, and more

<sup>59</sup> To Miss Guillarme 9 July 1843. N.D. IV, 258.

<sup>60</sup> Instructions to the missionaries. 1851. E.Sp. 374-376.

<sup>61</sup> To M. Clair. October 1839. N.D. II, 198.

<sup>62</sup> To M. Clair. October 1839. N.D. II, 198.

on *the mystery of the apostolic life of Christ*, with its paschal immolation for the salvation of the world. To enter into this form of likeness to Christ the Saviour Libermann insisted on the concrete means of meditation, interior surrender in peace, and docility to the Holy Spirit; but he gives a still greater place to what he calls 'practical union', which is nothing other than an apostolic life fully respectful of Christ's will and nourished on the Lord's sentiments<sup>63</sup>.

3) *'Your refuge is the most holy heart of Mary'*<sup>64</sup>.

Libermann sees the absolute primacy of Christ as *inseparable from Mary's presence*. We find the Blessed Virgin Mary, consequently, everywhere along Libermann's spiritual journey. He discovered her at the moment of his conversion. She is Jesus' Mother, and Jesus had become everything in his life. During his long seminary years, while Libermann was being introduced into mystical passivity, the particular place which Mary occupies in the development of the mystery of salvation became clearer to him. He liked to contemplate her in her relationship to Christ and the Holy Spirit, being faithful in this to the Mariology of the French school of spirituality. In a long letter to his friend, M. Dupont, a seminarian at Saint Sulpice, he drew up a commentary on the famous prayer of Fr de Condren, 'O Jesu, Vivens in Maria'<sup>65</sup>. The Blessed Virgin Mary is God's success. United in an altogether special way to Christ, by reason of her maternity, she lived in perfect harmony with the Incarnate Word, so much so that she is the best model of our union with Christ. Another letter, written some months earlier to another seminarian, gives us the level of his thought.

**May Jesus live in us as he lived in Mary; may we be united to Mary as she was united to Jesus, in a unity of desire, love, acts of will and point of view. May we be blind, inert and annihilated to ourselves and of ourselves, and may the mind of Jesus be all our occupation, our movement and our life, to unite us and make us one and the same thing with him in Mary, through Mary and with Mary. I know very well that we will never reach the perfection of this divine love and union; let us not**

<sup>63</sup> To Instructions to the missionaries. 1851. E.Sp. 531-532.

<sup>64</sup> To M. Dupont 21 August 1842. N.D. III, 276.

<sup>65</sup> To M. Dupont 1 April 1841. N.D. II, 456.

**even pretend to it. But let us pray that Jesus may give us a little spark of it, and let us pray to Mary to draw us into her admirable dispositions, to unite us to them and give us a share in them<sup>66</sup>.**

Libermann's moderation in speaking of our Lady must not hide from us the intensity of his Marian experience, which, by the way, is theologically unimpeachable. Libermann loved our Lady greatly. He was attracted especially by Mary's holiness and the richness of her prayer life. He had no hesitation offering her as a model to his missionaries, because of this life of oblation, which characterized her mother's heart<sup>67</sup>. Likewise, Libermann believed firmly in the tenderness of Mary's heart; he takes refuge in it<sup>68</sup>. He consecrated his future missionary Congregation to her, which would be called 'Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary'. The sanctuary of Our Lady of Victories would play a big role when the Congregation was being born and throughout its foundation years. At the time of the merger with the older Society of the Holy Ghost he would explain to his confreres that the consecration to the Holy Spirit would lessen in nothing that made to the holy heart of Mary, for who more than she lived of the fulness of the Holy Spirit? The second Rule, of 1849, says:

**The missionaries will consider the immaculate heart of Mary as a perfect model of fidelity to all the inspirations of the divine Spirit and of the interior practice of the virtues of the religious and apostolic life. They will find a refuge in it to which they will have recourse in all their work and troubles, in their weaknesses and temptations<sup>69</sup>.**

### C – DOCILITY TO THE HOLY SPIRIT

#### 1) *'The Holy Spirit is to be your guide'*<sup>70</sup>.

Assent to an active God and openness to the apostolic holiness of Christ can only be lived in docility to the Holy Spirit, who is the bond

<sup>66</sup> To a seminarian 19 June 1840. N.D. II, 128-129.

<sup>67</sup> To M. Logier 6 May 1851. N.D. XIII, 138-139.

<sup>68</sup> To M. Dupont 21 August 1842. N.D. III, 276.

<sup>69</sup> Rule of 1849. N.D. X, 568.

<sup>70</sup> To M. Lannurien. 12 December 1841. N.D. III, 73.

of love between the Father and the Son. Libermann takes docility to the Holy Spirit for granted. Christ cannot live and act in us unless we are docile to his Spirit, who is the Spirit of the Father and of the Son. The spiritual and apostolic life always presuppose this fundamental drive. Fr Libermann wrote to the young, intellectual and idealistic Lannurien:

**You do not have to be able to perceive your progress, since it is not you who further yourself but the Holy Spirit. He, rather than your own head, must guide you. Let it be enough for you that he knows what he is doing, you have only to follow his divine leading all along. . . Trust the Holy Spirit's guidance, do not ask what you have to do. Go to God more by the heart than by the head. If you go to him with a firm will full of love, your head will know all it needs to<sup>71</sup>.**

From the time of his conversion until the day of his death, *Libermann tried to live out this docility to the Holy Spirit*, both in his spiritual life and in his apostolate and work as founder. At every turning, we find this docility to the Holy Spirit, comprising interior availability and the greatest trust. His finest letters on docility to the Holy Spirit date from the periods of Issy and Rennes, when the ways of God were not at all clear as regards his future. Later, at the time of the foundation of the Congregation and the sending of the first missionaries, Fr Libermann would always have the same interior attitude of docility to the Holy Spirit in what concerned the missionary and apostolic life<sup>72</sup>. In several places, the Commentary on St John's Gospel reveals this importance of the Holy Spirit. Commenting on Jesus' meeting with Nicodemus, Libermann penned this fine prayer:

**O most holy and adorable Spirit of my Jesus, let me hear your gentle voice. Refresh me with your precious inspiration. O divine Spirit, I want to be before you like a light feather, so that your breath may carry me where it will, and that I may offer not the least resistance to it<sup>73</sup>.**

If it is important to emphasize Libermann's insistence on docility to the Holy Spirit, it is still more important to make clear what role

<sup>71</sup> To M. Lannurien. 12 December 1841. 74.

<sup>72</sup> To M. Lairé. 8 May 1851. N.D. XIII, 144.

<sup>73</sup> Saint John's Commentary second edition. p. 86.



this docility plays. There is no suggestion of illuminism in Libermann. On the contrary, docility to the Holy Spirit cannot be dissociated from relationship to Christ and connection with the Church. *Libermann's spirituality is Trinitarian* in its origin, in its aim, and in its movement. Everything comes from the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit; and we go back to the Father through the Son by being docile to the Holy Spirit. Thus the Holy Spirit is inseparable in his workings from Christ, the Incarnate Word. Libermann explained clearly to a young seminarian the detailed workings of the Holy Spirit:

**The Holy Spirit acts uniformly. His action is strong but smooth, it is harmonious and without agitation and it tends, moreover, to union with our lord<sup>74</sup>.**

In a long letter to M. Dupont, Fr Libermann makes the remark:

**In order to ask that Jesus live in us, it is enough to ask that the Holy Spirit dwell in us to establish Jesus' life, to make us live Jesus' life; for the Word of God lives in us only through his Holy Spirit who dwells in us<sup>75</sup>.**

In other places Fr Libermann often calls the Holy Spirit the Spirit of Jesus.

2) *'The fruit of Jesus' Spirit is always joy and peace'<sup>76</sup>.*

Docility to the Holy Spirit is not lived haphazardly. *Libermann often liked to list the signs which manifest a true docility to the Holy Spirit.* Several letters deserve to be quoted in their entirety. He wrote as follows to a seminarian in 1841:

**The divine Spirit, while acting with great force, fills your soul with gentleness and peace. He establishes Jesus' life in you, Jesus' desires, affections and loves. . . . When the divine Spirit is acting in us, our soul is on fire and, in the midst of this fire, it is carried along and united to God effortlessly and calmly and unperturbedly, without annoyance or the slightest touch of self-**

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<sup>74</sup> To M. Douay. 31 December 1841. N.D. III, 88.

<sup>75</sup> To M. Dupont. 1 April 1841. N.D. II, 463.

<sup>76</sup> To M. Cahier. 25 May 1838. L.Sp. I, 516.

**love; on the contrary it goes forward in humility, not only before God but before ourselves and all beings. O my dear friend, how happy we are to be under the divine Spirit's power, under the complete influence of the Spirit of Jesus' love. Everything turns to love within us. . . .<sup>77</sup>**

Libermann offers a whole cluster of standards to know if one is being docile to the Holy Spirit. They are in fact the fruits of the Spirit: humility of heart, gentleness, interior surrender, peace, fervour of the will, and so on. Docility to the Holy Spirit cannot take place without these spiritual qualities. Thus it matters to note these interior fruits, so as to be certain of following the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Fr Libermann wrote to a young missionary in Guinea:

**May Jesus' Spirit animate all your actions, may he form all the sentiments of your soul, may he mortify and moderate all turbulent vivaciousness of your mind, all the hard or rigid sentiments of your heart, in a word, all that is passionate and unruly in your soul. May he communicate to your heart the gentleness and humility of which the divine Master gave us the example. Oh, how important is this gentleness and humility of heart, and how few people possess it! . . . The Spirit of Jesus cannot animate whoever lacks these two great virtues; it is very frequently replaced by one's own spirit, and sometimes by the spirit of darkness<sup>78</sup>.**

This docility to the Holy Spirit, which opens the way to mystical passivity, manifests itself not only in prayer but in our way of living. Docility to the Holy Spirit is certainly a fundamental attitude in prayer, and in mental prayer in particular; little by little we enter into the world of Christ, his mystery of salvation and his sentiments. But docility to the Holy Spirit must encompass all of life, in the form of concrete watchfulness and practical union. This is particularly true for the apostolic worker who must not be animated by natural zeal but by zeal born of Christ's charity. Concretely, docility to the Holy Spirit is authenticated in the apostolic life by patience, gentleness, interior peace and ability to wait for God's good time.

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<sup>77</sup> To M. Douay. 31 December 1841. N.D. III, 87-88.

<sup>78</sup> To M. Lairé. 8 May 1851. N.D. XIII, 144.

Peace gives a quality to zeal which it ought always to have, namely, a great gentleness. The ardour with which we must undertake everything which procures the glory of God must not prevent us from preserving interior gentleness, a gentleness which must visibly overflow into all our conduct making it as gentle throughout as our divine Master's own<sup>79</sup>.

#### D – APOSTOLIC CHARITY AT THE SERVICE OF THE POOR

##### 1) '*Charity, charity, above all, charity*'<sup>80</sup>.

Fr Libermann was at death's door on the evening of 31 January 1852. His life was hanging on a thread. He was scarcely speaking, in broken phrases. When the people around begged him for his last instructions, he murmured what was his last will:

To be fervent, fervent, always fervent... And above all charity, charity, above all charity... Charity in Jesus Christ, charity by Jesus Christ, charity in the name of Jesus Christ... Fervour... charity... union in Jesus Christ... Sacrifice yourselves for Jesus... for Jesus alone... with Jesus... with Jesus... Sacrifice yourselves with Mary... God is all, man is nothing... The spirit of sacrifice... and zeal for God's glory and the salvation of souls<sup>81</sup>.

In this last will, not only are the priority of God and the primacy of Christ to be noted, but also the insistence on apostolic holiness, constituted by fervour, zeal and the gift of self, even unto sacrifice. But the word which recurs as a leitmotif is *charity*. That contains everything for Libermann. If the missionary is fervent and gives himself for the salvation of the poor, even to the sacrifice of himself, it is through love. Docility to the Holy Spirit cannot be separated from the theological virtue of charity. God is love, and our relationship with God, through Christ, in the Holy Spirit, is accomplished in love<sup>82</sup>.

But if the sensibility and intelligence are touched by love, theologi-

<sup>79</sup> Provisory Rule. 1840. N.D. II, 286-287.

<sup>80</sup> 31 January 1852. N.D. XIII, 659.

<sup>81</sup> 31 January 1852. N.D. XIII, 659.

<sup>82</sup> To M. Mangot. 6 July 1840. N.D. II, 133.

cally understood, charity in fact is rooted above all in the heart and will. Libermann insisted a lot on this place of the heart and will, which has sometimes caused him to be accused of anti-intellectualism. Two points need to be borne in mind. On the one hand, Libermann was a mystic, for whom the priority of God and docility to the Holy Spirit were taken for granted; on the other hand, holiness takes place above all at the level of will and heart, for it is a question of loving as God loves. The understanding is not neglected, it enters into love as an element of knowledge; it also enters into activity, by way of reflection. But reason can form vicious circles and beget illusions of holiness, in which the will and heart have no part. Libermann called that 'complacency and satisfaction of the mind'<sup>83</sup>.

**'In Christian perfection the principal and important thing is not knowing and thinking but doing'**<sup>84</sup>.

2) *'May your life be one of love, peace, zeal and mercy'*<sup>85</sup>.

The theological virtue of charity is, at one and the same time, love of God and fraternal love. We find these two aspects of the virtue of charity in Libermann, united inseparably. Liberman's theocentrism will not keep anyone from serving his fellow human beings, but on the contrary will provoke him to a love for others which goes beyond mere human kindnesses. *Libermann's spirituality is an apostolic spirituality*, which pours forth in service and love of the poorest, even unto the immolation of oneself. In fact, by rejecting a zeal for others which is purely human and 'natural' Libermann advocates a love which will be at one and the same time attentive to God and attentive to others. God and the other are inseparable, *the same love brings us to both*. This also explains why contemplation and action necessarily go together and constitute an inseparable whole. Missionary and apostolic zeal draw from the same love of charity, which make one attuned simultaneously both to God and other people, in particular the poorest. In practice this comes down to mean an insistence on meditation<sup>86</sup>, but also on apostolic zeal and practical union. Fr Libermann wrote to Fr

<sup>83</sup> To 2 seminarious. 17 June 1838. L.Sp. I, 501.

<sup>84</sup> To M. Dupont. 16 December 1840. N.D. II, 176.

<sup>85</sup> To M. Le Berre. 1850. Suppl. N.D. XII, 12. et L.Sp. IV, 688.

<sup>86</sup> To Monseigneur Truffet 22 November 1847. N.D. IX, 351.



Clair, who was in the apostolic community of Bordeaux and feared the apostolate:

**Do not remain closed within yourself, either as a result of timidity or for fear of losing your recollection. The recollection you would lose by coming in contact with people is only a recollection of the imagination and feeling, but the genuine interior recollection of the charity of God you will not lose. Charity will not undo charity towards God; on the contrary it makes it perfect and increases it, even though you may lose the felt and 'imaginative' part<sup>87</sup>.**

Libermann was not content with affirming the close link between love of God and fraternal love. He often came back at length *to the characteristics of fraternal charity*. Being the first fruit of the Spirit, charity will be found in all the other fruits of the Spirit. Libermann loved to enumerate all these fruits of charity, distinguishing carefully what comes from ourselves and what comes from God. Thus in the Provisional Rule he gave a detailed description of true fraternal charity as it should be lived in community:

**We must not love our confreres in order to be loved and esteemed in return, or for any other human motive. . . We must love one another as the saints in heaven love one another. To love our brothers in God and God in them, to bless, praise and rejoice in God with all one's heart for the spiritual good one sees in them<sup>88</sup>.**

Likewise fraternal charity goes along with gentleness, delicacy, mutual respect, patience, harmony, interior peace, fraternal listening and humility. Many letters bear trace of these other fruits of the Spirit, which are only an extension of theological charity<sup>89</sup>.

This theological love is exercised in a quite particular way in three situations which are typical of the missionary vocation: dealings with the poor, evangelization and community life. In practice it is not enough to choose service of the poor, that is to say, in Libermann's time, the former slaves and the African continent. They must be loved in a way that will give them back their dignity and lead them to

<sup>87</sup> To M. Clair 26 August 1848. N.D. X, 293-294.

<sup>88</sup> Provisory Rule. 1840. N.D. II, 282-284.

<sup>89</sup> To some seminarians. 12 November 1837. L.Sp. I, 342.

the gospel, if God wills it. On the occasion of the sudden death of Bishop Truffet Libermann wrote to the King of Dakar:

**My heart goes out to you. My heart is for the Africans, for all Africans. I am Jesus' servant; he wants me to love everyone, as he loves them; but he inspires me with a more living and tender love for his dear brothers, the Black people. And because I love these Black people so tenderly I wish to be taken up all my life long with bringing happiness to the people of Africa, not only their happiness on earth but above all in heaven<sup>90</sup>.**

To help his missionary confreres, who could be tempted by attitudes of superiority or disdain, Libermann often came back to genuine apostolic charity, made of gentleness, goodness, affability, patience and understanding<sup>91</sup>. Likewise Libermann insisted on genuine apostolic zeal, which should animate the missionaries' hearts. The Provisional Rule speaks of this at length<sup>92</sup>. But in his letters too Libermann comes back on it, for the success of the mission depends on it. Now he sees true apostolic zeal as inseparable from charity, which is its source, as it were. 'It consists of pure, burning charity', proceeding in calm, gentleness, humility and constancy in the midst of difficulties. Contrariwise, zeal which is too human is trapped by the esteem of others, self-love, vanity, and gets lost in projects which have nothing to do with the Lord's expectations; moreover, it leads to bitterness, irritation and discouragement. 'True zeal, peaceful, humble and unremitting, sanctifies the soul, does not get irritated but leads us to pray for souls which are sinful and to offer ourselves to God for them'<sup>93</sup>.

Finally, charity must be at the heart of community life. The Congregation was willed into existence for that, namely, to allow us to grow together in holiness and thus to make sure of a more efficacious evangelization<sup>94</sup>. Libermann would insist very much on this aspect of fraternal life, praying for it personally, so that the communities would remain very united with each other. He sees that we have no other models but Jesus and our blessed Lady:

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<sup>90</sup> To Eliman 1 January 1848. N.D. X, 24.

<sup>91</sup> To Fr. Galais 12 April 1848. N.D. X, 161.

<sup>92</sup> Provisional Rule. 1840. N.D. II, 284-289.

<sup>93</sup> Provisional Rule. 1845. pp. 150.

<sup>94</sup> Mémoire à la Propagande. 1840. N.D. II, 70-71.

The members of the Congregation will treat one another as brothers animated by the same spirit, which is the Spirit of God, and by the same sentiments, which are those that animate the holy and immaculate heart of Mary. They will regard what they do to their brothers as done to Jesus Christ himself, and they will behave in everything towards them as they would behave towards our divine Saviour and his holy Mother<sup>95</sup>.

There are different emphases in each spirituality. Starting from the key-concepts which we have analysed, we can distinguish four in Libermann: 1) *a trinitarian emphasis*, insisting on the primacy of Christ and docility to the Holy Spirit; 2) *a factual emphasis*, which gives importance to the events we live through, for God makes himself known in them; 3) *an apostolic emphasis*, giving the choice place to theological charity; 4) *a mystical emphasis*, that is to say, a conception of the spiritual life envisaged in terms of passivity or, again, in terms of surrender to the fulness of God's activity in us.

Our second founder's spirituality is an immense store waiting to be quarried still more widely and deeply. In any case, it constitutes a formidable path of holiness for us missionaries. By means of it we can also find our true place in the Church, provided we seat ourselves at the school of Libermann. Libermann himself wrote to the young Lannurien, then a seminarian:

**You should not read spiritual authors to learn the theory of the life of prayer and recollection. I would not have you learn it in any other way than through your own development. Carry on with the good will God gives you, and do your best to please God and become a disciplined man of recollection and prayer<sup>96</sup>.**

Fr Bernard TENAILLEAU, C.S.Sp.

#### ABBREVIATIONS

N.D.: Notes et Documents.

L.Sp.: Lettres Spirituelles du Vénérable Libermann.

E.Sp.: Ecrits Spirituels du Vénérable Libermann.

<sup>95</sup> Rule of 1849. N.D. X, 537.

<sup>96</sup> To M. Lannurien 12 December 1841. N.D. III, 73.

## II – FATHER LIBERMANN’S MISSIONARY INTUITION

by J. M. R. Tillard, o.p.

### A BASIC TEXT

The best way to introduce Libermann’s profound intuition is to quote a text of 1851 which summarizes it admirably:

**To preach the good news to the poor, that is our general goal. Nevertheless, the missions are the principal object we aim at, and in the missions we have chosen the most wretched and abandoned souls. Providence gave us our work by the blacks, whether in Africa or in the colonies; incontestably, these are the most wretched and abandoned populations down to our day. We would also desire to work in France for the salvation of souls, but still having the poor as principal goal, without abandoning, all the same, those who are not (ND XIII 170; 1851).**

This text is remarkable both for its boldness and its balance. Note straightway the expression, ‘by the blacks’, where we might expect ‘for’. The motivation for interest in the blacks is the fact that they are the most destitute and abandoned down to that day. Libermann’s plea fits nicely into the gospel option for the poor.

### THE JUDEO-CHRISTIAN THREAD

Those few lines seem to me essential for discovering the meaning Libermann gave to mission. It is a meaning with a long ancestry. If its main source had to be put in a phrase, I would say without hesitation that it is the great Jewish current, which, on meeting with Christianity, profoundly marked the Europe of the last few centuries. It is



interesting that the big movements in rethinking Christianity have often occurred around convert Jews. These people, on recognizing Christ, brought to the Church the venerable stream of a high spirituality, embedded in thousands of years of search and suffering. Think of Theodore and Alphonse Ratisbonne, Raïssa Maritain, Max Jacob, Gustave Cohen, and the two intellectuals who remained on the threshold but were still moulded by the gospel, Henri Bergson and Simone Weil — to speak only of France. The influence of David Drach's conversion of Libermann is well known. There is no doubt that Jacob Libermann belongs to the same current. What the Ratisbannes were on the level of dialogue with Israel, what the Maritains represented in the harmonious dialogue between intelligence and grace, Libermann is in the domain of the rethinking of mission. Libermann breathed the old spirit of the People of Abraham into the renewal of missionary zeal that the pontificate of Gregory XVI inspired.

I consider Libermann's *Commentary on the Gospel according to St John* the basic work for understanding his soul; it is to be read in tandem with his *Instructions to Missionaries*. Unfortunately the latter's heavy style often obscures the sharpness of its thought. One discovers that in his interior life as in his missionary plans he never ceased to depend on what I call the rock of the Jewish, and then Christian, tradition, the mystery of poverty as it was understood by the Poor of Yahweh, the *anawim*. When we reread certain dramatic events of his life in that light, in particular the epilepsy that was his humiliation (as his famous letter to his family makes clear) and the failure of the Rennes noviciate, we observe something taking place in his suffering, namely, the presence of the spirit of the *anawim*, of the poor small Remainder, which is the bearer of salvation through its very poverty.

Also born of that slow transformation of Jewish faith into Christian faith is the mercy, tenderness and understanding of the human heart that emerges particularly in his correspondence with his missionaries. The spiritual desert in which he found himself after the great crisis of Metz, which shook his Jewish faith, is no doubt the place where God's true image appeared to him with full clarity in the face of Christ Jesus. Libermann always saw Jesus as poor among the poor. And if, for him, he is the Saviour, it is because he accomplished by his death as a poor man and as suffering Servant the ancient promise to Israel. That is the texture of Libermann's faith.

In a very moving though rarely quoted passage in the *Commentary on St John*, Libermann certainly reveals the heart of his life. Trying to decipher the destiny of Israel — his own people! — when con-

fronted with God's plan, he shows that, despite everything, the enterprise should issue forth in mercy.

**God choses certain more faithful members of this unfortunate people in order to work out his great plans of mercy among the gentiles. And this people, once outside its vocation, falls itself into darkness, and God's justice acts against it in place of the mercy it has rejected. Justice rejects it as a people, while mercy remains for the individuals who form part of it, because they are God's creatures, were redeemed by the Son of God and always retain the free-will to profit by God's mercy. These reflections deserve the attention of people who are chosen by God to evangelize, to sanctify, the peoples. Holiness manifests itself, communicates itself, to them under the guise of mercy, an immense mercy for them and for many (CSJ 692-3).**

The great intuitions on mission are contained in these lines. There is only one base: the God of the Fathers of Israel. The salvation to be communicated to the world will come from Israel, from the faithful members of this unfortunate people. But it will be so because the experience of their own destitution will make them particularly hospitable. Salvation will be mercy, a mercy rooted in the mercy God had for Israel. Jesus is the proof of this constitutive link between salvation and mercy. In him, God shows himself merciful to Israel to the extent that, in spite of everything, he ordains that salvation will come from Israel, a sinful people. This is an extraordinary intuition.

Deuteronomy and the other great texts of the Law and the prophets are discernible in the background. But in Libermann the word 'mercy' has a particular resonance, almost sensual. This, I believe, explains his charm, his charism, the emphasis that marks his rule. We know that as a matter of fact he attracted people — at the Sulpicians, then at Rennes. Aware of his ignorance, his epilepsy, he himself wondered why. This charm stemmed from his mercy. He was a merciful person wishing to found a community of mercy on that same mercy transfigured in Christ. All this is very Jewish. Certain of Liberman's thoughts, adapted to the drama of the working-class, recur in Simone Weil. The latter saw the world of the working-class with the same eyes of mercy as Libermann looked at the drama of the blacks and the poor. Libermann's missionary is by no means a propagandist of triumphal truths nor a spiritual adventurer. Before Vatican I, Libermann had expressed ideas on acculturation or dialogue with Africans that would not be officially said until after Vatican II.

A further consequence of this option of poverty was the emphasis placed on people to be loved rather than on the dimensions of the Church to be extended as much as possible, or on a proclamation of the gospel based on 'proofs'. If he spoke of the 'expansion of holy Church' (ND VI 113), of the widening of its borders, it was always with a view to the 'expansion' of mercy and not for the growth of prestige.

According to one of his sayings in the *Instructions to Missionaries*, the harvest the Father must garner at the end of time will be 'that of goodness more than that of justice'. Moreover, in a page of the *Commentary on St John* he dwells on the relationship between mercy and justice:

**(God) having created us only with thoughts of mercy and in order to communicate himself to us in his holiness, his mercy has never been removed from us. It always exceeds justice by far in the relations between God and us; furthermore, God's justice does not act by force — that is to say, when the creature refuses mercy (CSJ 689).**

The inspiration behind a passage of the Provisional Rule presages *Gaudium et Spes*:

**If they come upon people who rebel against the word of faith which they come to proclaim, they will not fail to bring them the same human advantages that they bring to those who are faithful and listen, with the same charity and the same care; they will bring everything that could help to cultivate minds and the natural interests of their people (Spiritan Rule no. 19).**

This explains some of the advice he gave the first missionaries, striking in its humanness, in its truly evangelical denseness, in its sense of respect. Today we would say: 'Even if you cannot baptize many, do not withdraw. Love these men and women. Let them grow in their human qualities'. The missionary should see the gospel not from the angle of zeal but from that of goodness. A priori sympathy for the Africans, whoever they be, is needed. This sympathy is not at all a bait, a means. Libermann, here again thoroughly Jewish, knows that, in the Promise, creation and salvation are inseparably bound.

**Do not easily give ear to what the people who travel up and down the coast say, when they tell you about groups of people they have visited, even if they have stayed there several years.**



**Hear what they have to say, but do not let their words influence your judgement. These people examine things from their own point of view, with their own bias, they would falsify all your ideas. Hear everything and remain peaceful within yourselves, examine things in the spirit of Jesus Christ, with an independence of every influence and every bias whatsoever. Be filled with, and animated by, the charity of God and the pure zeal which his spirit will give you. I am sure that you will judge our poor blacks very differently from all those people who talk about them (ND IX 330-1847).**

At this point he speaks out extraordinarily strongly, especially in the colonial context of the day:

**Do not judge by first impressions. Do not judge by what you have seen in Europe, according to what you have been used to in Europe. Rid yourselves of Europe, of its customs and spirit. Become black with the blacks, and you will judge them appropriately; become black with the blacks, to form them appropriately, not in the European fashion, but leaving them what belongs to them. Be to them as servants should be to their masters, to the ways and styles and customs of their masters, and this in order to make of them, little by little, a people of God in the end. This is what St Paul calls making oneself all things to all, so as to win all for Jesus Christ (ND IX 330-331-1847).**

That is a passage of rare nobility and great depth. It ranks with the finest pages of mission theology of the last century. Certainly the same intuition is found in the provisional Rule, but less strongly:

**In mission countries (the missionaries) will conform to the condition of the people to whom they wish to bring the words of salvation. They ought to consider carefully what belongs to the people's character and the nature of the country in their ways and customs. They will take care not to disturb these habits when they are not opposed to God's law and not to try to train them to European ways of life (Spiritan Rule no. 13).**

Two very characteristic texts must not be forgotten. One comes from a letter to the King of Dakar; its expressions are other than diplomatic politeness:

**My heart is all yours, my heart is for the Africans. I am Jesus' servant, he wants me to love all people as he loves them, but he**



inspires me with a more heartfelt and tender love for his dear brothers, the black people. And because I love the black people so tenderly, I wish — and Jesus Christ, my master, also wishes it — that my whole life long I may be engaged in procuring and providing the happiness of the people of Africa, not only their happiness on earth but especially that happiness which is measureless and endless in the temple of God's glory that heaven is. (ND X 24-25).

The second passage constitutes a synthesis of what we have just seen. This moving text certainly reveals Libermann's profound soul. He speaks from his heart after the Haiti failure.

If we had been able to form an establishment in the Republic (of Haiti), I feel sure that our success would have been complete. After a short number of years we could have provided the world with proof of the wrongness and bad faith of people who shamelessly calumniate a large portion of the human race. Thereby we would have destroyed the ridiculous prejudices that the ambition and self-interest of a handful of people have unfortunately spread abroad, to the detriment of many millions of souls created in God's image and redeemed by Jesus' blood. I am convinced that our success would have been complete and that we would have brought the defamers of the African race to see that they are not less God's children for not having white skin, that their uprightness of soul is not less, that they are just as capable of accepting the faith and a sound morality and the true principles and practice of civilization; in a word, that colour gives no inferiority in anything (ND VIII 334) (1846).

Those lines deserve to be analysed in depth. In my researches into missionary religious life I have never found better. The osmosis of humanness and gospel reveals Libermann's charm, the spirit he wanted to inspire into his Congregation. But this attitude must have interior support. Libermann — precisely because he is not an activist — believes in the necessity of this attitude. Now, when we try to characterize it, we find once again the old Judeo-Christian thread, with its poverty, its *anawim*. For Libermann the interior life is rooted in the personal experience of evangelical poverty that he interprets with his Jewish soul. We have several indications of this; we will mention just a few.

Here is how he writes to his family:

So, my dear friends, I can assure you that my dear sickness is a treasure for me, preferable to all the goods that the world offers its lovers, since these so-called goods are only mud and wretchedness in the eyes of a true child of God; all they do is separate him from his Father in heaven. I hope that if our Lord Jesus Christ continues to give me grace as he has up to now, grace which I do not deserve at all, I will lead a perfectly poor life entirely employed in his service. Then I will be richer than if I were to possess the whole world, and I defy the world to find me a happier person, for who is richer than the person who wants nothing? Who is happier than the one whose desires are accomplished? So why worry yourselves about me? Are you afraid I will die of hunger? What! The Lord feeds the birds of the field, and will he not find a way to feed me too? He loves me more than the birds of the field (LS I 10).

### WITH A HEART OF POVERTY

The missionary's apostolic weapon will be this poverty, perceived as poverty of means and, above all, poverty of heart. When he meditates on 'cor unum et anima una', he underlines the poverty of heart of the first community, the first missionary group. This will mark his outlook on the ecclesial mission. Evangelical poverty is what shines through. It was no accident that he took Paul for his patron and became a Franciscan tertiary. He wanted poverty to adhere to the very skin of his Congregation. The Congregation, in turn, by this attitude, would be in some way connected with the mystique of the Poor of Yahweh.

I bring up here a number of points on this subject, which I will present in no special order.

This poverty imposes respect for all individuals and declines to use intemperate zeal. And no miracles! Libermann considered that God's miracle would be the salvation of humankind. Human beings are the raw matter of God's miracle, therefore they must be treated with infinite respect even when sinful, 'raising obstacles to the gospel'. In respect for human beings the work of salvation is beginning to be accomplished, and it is to be done with the gentleness of the Servant of Yahweh. Note this piece of advice:

**Especially will the missionaries exercise the greatest gentleness towards the most hardened sinners, towards those who are weak or sick because of the vices or attachments that keep them bent to the ground, towards coarse souls, towards those who resist them, and in general towards everyone. They will regard themselves as the fathers of all sinners, representatives of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore they will treat each one they meet with the gentleness required (ND II 287).**

In point of fact, a false zeal leading to roundabout niceties and subterfuge cannot bring others to discover their human qualities, but only the truth of gospel love; now this is to be found in Christ. A very fine text speaks clearly of this link between the missionary and his communion in Christ:

**So that people will have to recognize in them him who sends them, the lovable Lord Jesus, their master, the missionaries must tend with all their strength to delineate in themselves his incomprehensible holiness, never saying, 'that's enough'! They must be so filled with his spirit of holiness that they spread him around by their words and deeds, filling all they meet with him. Then their life will be a life of faith (Spiritans Rule no. 34).**

A second aspect of mission is connected with this mystique of poverty. The goal of mission is in no way a vision of the Church's glory in the manner of St Robert Bellarmine. The dream of the apostolate in Africa comes from the evangelical desire to bring God's love 'to those who are numbered among the most forgotten'. Mission is not first defined by geographic terrain but by the condition of those who hear and accept the gospel. The Provisional Rule includes this fine statement:

**The missions to which the Congregation will apply itself will be among peoples who are poor and despised, whose needs are great, who are the most neglected in the Church of God and among whom much fruit can be expected (Spiritans Rule no. 4).**

So Spiritans do not go where they can bank on the greatest external success. They choose according to the need of the peoples to whom the gospel impels them. They are not to behave like conquerors for a great cause but like witnesses to God's love. It is also because the only true missionary is Jesus Christ (*Instructions to Mis-*



sionaries, pp. 18-19), whose 'kindness, goodness and gentleness' they will imitate.

The missionaries will avoid a harsh zeal that is more pharisaic than apostolic. The fervour with which everything that can procure God's glory must be embraced will always be tempered by a gentle charity (which will fill them) and the kindness of their divine model (Spiritan Rule no. 42).

This is spelt out in a gospel meditation of weighty significance and rare theological density:

To be fully convinced that our divine Master in sending us out wishes us to resemble him, we have only to consider the three years of his public life. To what end did he go about with his apostles through the towns and countryside of Judea, Galilee and Samaria during those three years? Was it to convert those countries by his preaching and miracles? If that was his motive, why is it that, after so much labour and after his holy and cruel passion, he had obtained such small results? If in his preaching Jesus Christ had had the idea of converting the peoples of Judea and Samaria, the divine power that resided in him substantially would have obtained the result he set out to have. But no! Jesus wanted to show his apostles and all those whom he was to send to souls until the end of the world how they should behave in their private lives, how they should act with regard to people, how they should speak, how they should suffer, how they should work for the salvation of souls. And at the end of his life on earth, at the last action he performed in the midst of them, he said: *Exemplum dedi vobis, ut quemadmodum ego feci vobis, ita et vos faciatis*. Those words followed on the great example that teaches us the charity and docile and obedient humility towards each other that should fill us (Instructions to Missionaries pp. 18-19) (1872).

And here again the idea of evangelical poverty reappears:

We will remember the word he said to us in the persons of his apostles: 'I send you as sheep in the midst of wolves'. That is why we will exercise the greatest gentleness towards those who persecute us, who try to resist or harm us. The missionaries will be as defenceless sheep before their enemies, so long as these latter attack only their persons and God's glory is not compromised (Spiritan Rule no. 43).



This is a rereading of the beatitudes in an intensely realistic situation. The missionary's bid is not proselytism but conformity to the ways of Jesus, Servant of Yahweh.

Another idea pervades almost all of Fr Libermann's writings like a watermark. The goodness in question is in no way an ethical attentiveness that is only interested in the soul to be saved. Although Libermann always speaks of people as 'souls', the goodness he inculcates is meant to take the whole person into account. The Provisional Rule, once more, contains a key statement:

**In general their love for people will induce them to let slip no occasion of doing not only spiritual but material good as well. They will bring all the comfort and ease they can to their pains. As for a big fault, they will reproach themselves for the least negligence in giving help and consolation to those afflicted by poverty, sickness or any other trouble. They will render to the poorest of the sick all the services, even the most difficult, and will do so with calmness and cordiality in cheerfulness of mind and heart (Spiritan Rule no. 16) (1840).**

In the colonial context, this is not a neutral outlook! The evangelical worth of the following lines can be weighed in the light of Libermann's position on slavery:

**They will be the advocates, support and defenders of the weak and helpless against all their oppressors. These are the circumstances in which our Lord's charity and power (will appear in them). Yet their behaviour should always be governed by a gentleness and holy prudence, with which their Master will provide them if they are faithful (Spiritan Rule no. 17) (1840).**

It follows that the mission appears to be more of quality than of quantity in its ultimate objective. It centres on bringing a certain quality of life. The poor for whom the Congregation exists are poor in body as much as in spirit (Letter to the missionaries). This non-separation of soul and body indicates that Libermann — again very much a Jew — entertained a global vision of God's plan. He thinks of God's image in that way. Basically he is very close here to the Gospel according to St John, where the *semeion* (the evangelical sign) is in no way abstract, for the gospel signs are the resurrection of Lazarus, the healing of the paralytic at the pool of Bethzetha. These are bodily

signs. In his *Commentary on St John* Libermann often shows he is alert to this global understanding of the salvific sign.

I emphasize that Libermann spoke thus in the rule of 1840, therefore in a text that was to be officially approved, where every word was obviously weighed. That he not only spoke of the defence of the weak and the little ones against all those who oppress them, but made of this a point of his rule, is a capital intuition. Here again, in his own proper context, Libermann proclaimed what in fact would only come to birth in our own century. Certain post-Conciliar texts come close to the prescriptions to which we have drawn attention.

It is true that difficult expressions are to be found here and there in his letters. But we are often reading only the replies to correspondences from his missionaries. It is interesting to consult the missionaries' letters. In several instances it is clear that the hard words are taken from expressions in those letters themselves. Libermann simply repeats them. Doubtless he did not want to discourage his readers, he declined to hurt them. The main bulk of his correspondence is filled with a sort of gentleness, respect, delicacy. Libermann was very feminine in temperament — for that matter, he was reproached about it — and this delicacy could at times block the expression of his own feelings, it could blunt his frankness. However that may be, the will to defend the poor and weak was always present. I believe it is dominant in Libermann's outlook.

'Gentle with the poor, strong and tenacious with the powerful': Despite certain expressions in his correspondence, that was his ideal. Is it not the heart of the gospel? And is the gospel not formulated in the light of the experience of the 'poor of Yahweh', that experience of Judaism of the exile, on which all Jewish faith was founded? Jesus' own apostolic soul passed through this crucible. We find ourselves back again at the same recurring theme.

There is still another implication in Libermann's esteem for poverty. The allusion to apostolic suffering occurs often in his writing. The missionary must not aim at becoming a hero of sanctity; he must seek only communion with the suffering Servant, trying to engrave in himself the features of Christ the Servant, features of goodness and simplicity. A short passage of the rule puts it well:

**The principle of all our conduct with regard to the poor to whom we are sent will be a tender, strong and compassionate love, a burning desire not of our own holiness but of their salvation and holiness (Spiritan Rule no. 52).**

Even more, this poverty constituted the most deep-rooted and dynamic character of the whole religious missionary Society (as it was called at the outset) that his followers were.

They will avoid pride, selfishness and jealousy among themselves, and will consider their society as a poor servant of the Church, employed in works that are lowliest in the eyes of people, working with fidelity and constancy to accomplish them. They will not worry about making their society glorious by the splendours of its works. They will be on guard against the wish to make it great, against a too natural desire to increase it in numbers or obtain more importance for it. They will rest satisfied with placing themselves in peace and trust at the Master's disposal, profitting by the circumstances that providence will furnish to become more and more useful in the Church (Spiritan Rule no. 104) (1849) (likewise no. 102) (1840).

Libermann, perhaps unconsciously, thought out the ideal of his society by linking it with the destiny and mission of the Remainder of Yahwah. To write those lines of a rule, a founder has to be either schizophrenic or a saint. These ideas interweave throughout the *Instructions to Missionaries* — the text quoted is not a digression. We are close here to St Paul's words, words that came to him, too, from his original Jewishness and plunge him into the mystery of Christ.

And I know such a man (whether in the body or out of the body, I know not: God knoweth): that he was caught up into paradise and heard secret words that it is not granted to man to utter. For such an one I will glory: but for myself I will glory nothing but in my infirmities. For though I should have a mind to glory, I shall not be foolish: for I will say the truth. But I forbear, lest any man should think of me above that which he seeth in me, or anything he heareth from me. And lest the greatness of the revelations should exalt me, there was given me a sting of my flesh, an angel of Satan, to buffet me. For which thing, thrice I besought the Lord that it might depart from me. And he said to me: My grace is sufficient for thee: for power is made perfect in infirmity. Gladly therefore will I glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may dwell in me. For which cause I please myself in my infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ. For when I am weak, then am I powerful (II Cor 2 : 3-10; Douai).



How could we not think of Libermann's personal experience: his epilepsy and the stigma it aroused for those around him, his stay in the attic in Rome, his problems with the Archbishop of Paris? 'A sting of my flesh, an angel of Satan'. Very often Libermann's allusions to Satan who strikes him are probably to be explained by that text. And there is the Lord's answer: 'My grace is sufficient. . . I will glory in my infirmities' I am convinced that Libermann's intuition had its roots in this text. His conversion and mission were in the footsteps of St Paul's charism as he emerged from Judaism as a missionary, passing from being a pharisee to being a missionary. Thus Libermann could write:

**Jesus sends us as he was sent; our mission is his. It is he who lives and suffers in those he sends, who draws souls to God his Father and communicates his graces to them through those he sends. But so that Jesus may live in his envoys, and do all things in and through them, they in turn must live in him, be united to him in their life, sufferings and apostolic activity (Instructions to Missionaries p. 15) (edn 1872).**

At this stage certain statements in the rule that might appear negative or somewhat black become clearer; some of the letters are more understandable. It is the 'I will glory in nothing but in my weaknesses' of St Paul. Sometimes one might get the impression of a seeking after weakness, smallness, a certain somewhat morbid obligingness — for example in the letter to a missionary wherein he seems to affirm that 'the more one is persecuted the better'. But overall his attachment to suffering is not macabre, and his writings offer ample evidence of this; thus the Provisional Rule affirms:

**They will place their treasure and joy in work, crosses, contradictions and afflictions of all kinds. Whenever they are deprived of these, they will fear they are not true apostles and will humble themselves before our Lord at seeing themselves unworthy of the usual reward given to those on earth whom he sends out. In the midst of these pains they will maintain their spirit serene, free, open, peaceful, their heart in the gentleness and humble joy that the Lord's love gives and they will preserve cheerfulness in their relationships with people. This (apostolic) strength should fill us with vigour and hardness to undertake everything. We must be courageously disposed to make Jesus Christ live and reign, at the expense of our repose, health, hon-**



our and all our interests, even our life if necessary (Spiritan Rule nos. 38, 39, 40).

We possess the key to interpreting the following passage.

A missionary sent by Jesus Christ who does not sanctify his sufferings cannot pretend to sanctify people in the truth. The holiness of Jesus Christ must dwell in the missionary, a holiness which must be grounded in his interior life and show itself in his conduct by his work and suffering. In that way, after the example of Jesus Christ, he begets souls to God. So we must all look on ourselves as victims dedicated to work, pain, exhaustion, death if necessary, for his glory and the salvation of souls. And if we do not all have the fortune to suffer to the same extent, nevertheless we are all set aside for God's glory and for the salvation of souls. In that we can all rejoice. Let those among us who have the fortune to suffer most place our joy in that suffering and sanctify ourselves in Jesus' love. Let those among us who suffer less not be grieved about our share; we will sanctify ourselves by our work, our desires, in humility of heart and in Jesus' love (Instructions to Missionaries edn 1872).

Libermann, remaining in line with the biblical mystique of the *anawim*, does not balk at suffering. He knows it is born of a world, of a human situation, for which the gospel is a source of contradiction, refusal, attack. His emphasis is not as negative as has been said, it takes the situation into account in the light of the gospel. It says: '*I do not fear the situation, I immerse it in the gospel, then it will become power in God*'.

## HOLINESS AND MISSION

In the first part of this article I underlined the Judeo-Christian thread in Libermann's outlook. Then I showed that for him the unreservedness of our self-giving to people translates the unreservedness of our attachment to Jesus Christ. Libermann admits no truly missionary enthusiasm without an ardent seeking of Jesus Christ. A passage of the rule summarizes this conviction:

**The missionaries' strength must not be based on their character and natural fervour, but must come entirely from the grace of the divine Spirit and be drawn from intimate union with Jesus. For soul, source and nourishment it will have a love of God that is pure, holy, burning, intimately graven in the heart, a love that ought to be the characteristic of the missionary of the poor, who is dedicated to the Holy Spirit and the immaculate and all apostolic heart of Mary (Spiritan Rule no. 51).**

I take the liberty in passing to give my point of view in all fraternal charity on a debated point. I am convinced that Libermann wanted to found a religious congregation.

**After such a vocation and a will so full of mercy, which places us in a position whereby we should be raised to such a high degree in the priestly life, God, in calling us to the religious life, has proven once more that he wishes to raise us to the genuine holiness of our state by giving us thereby an efficacious means of reaching it (Instructions Missionaries p. 63 edn 1872).**

But his intention has to be interpreted. The preceeding pages will help. I think I can resume Libermann's intention thus: he does not say, 'to be a good missionary, let us be religious'; he says, 'to spread the fulness of Christ around us, let us be at one and the same time missionary and religious'. To understand him we have to go back to the basic context. His outlook was global. His aim was to spread abroad the mystery of Christ, but to do so in love for the poor, for the little ones. Holiness and mission are not separated. Once again the Jewish background! An Israelite would never say, 'to be a good missionary, let us be Jewish!' but, 'for the glory of Yahweh, at one and the same time let us be persons who go to the end of the world to enlarge the tent of Jerusalem and let us be holy'. The starting-point and driving force of the activity is Yahweh, his Glory, his reign (rather than his Kingdom). So it was for Libermann. For Libermann, the importance of the religious life was rooted in that. I take the following lines as an example:

**These poor young men, having left their countries to be missionaries, have always kept the notion: 'I am a missionary above all'. Consequently, and quite unawares, they do not attach enough importance to religious life and give themselves over too much, I believe, to an external life. Well then! If this conjecture is well founded, it is important to enlighten these confreres**

by getting them to see that in truth the mission is the goal but religious life is a means *sine qua non*, a means which must hold all their attention and be the object of all their concern. If they are holy religious they will save souls, if they are not they will do no good, because God's blessing is attached to their holiness and their holiness depends solely on fidelity to the practices of religious life. I assure you that I have painful moments at times when I think of the continual sufferings of these poor young men, and the generosity with which they put up with them. I say to myself that we have here the makings of great saints. This tears my heart (ND XIII 353) (1851).

Libermann's vision is always God-centered, based on the reality of God in the mystery of Christ. Jesus Christ is to be made known. Now, Jesus Christ is inseparately holiness and mission. One 'follows' Jesus on a path where holiness and mission coalesce. This is the heart of this essay. I have presented Libermann's portrait as I see it, insisting that he has the soul of a convert from Judaism in order to show that in fact the charism of the Congregation is the charism of a spiritual experience, and in no sense a utilitarian charism. This seems to me ever more and more certain.

## THE FUTURE OF MISSION

At the end of this article, I would like to demonstrate that in this experience of Libermann's there is a perception absolutely in harmony with the drama of mission today. Another courageous and prophetic text of his can serve as an introduction to what follows, if we recall that the missionary monks of Germany and England tried to 'contextualize' the gospel.

God seems to want us to save this country rather by our sanctification than by our zeal. I mean that it is God's will that we take our place in the midst of these people by living a very holy life, paying altogether special attention to the priestly and religious virtues. This must be the object of our care and must in no way impede the exercise of our zeal, but on the contrary give it consistency and perfection. This system was followed by the

**holy religious who converted Germany and England and is what Jesus wants us to follow. It alone will draw down his blessing.**

That text, not frequently enough quoted, is categoric and is tied to another aspect of Libermann's thought. Libermann insists on the birth of an indigenous clergy, fully homogeneous with the soil of the local Church:

**Once they are settled in a country, the missionaries will do everything possible to establish a clergy drawn from that country. No trouble or sacrifice should be spared to organize and perfect this work, which is so much in harmony with the views of the Church's divine Founder and so insistently recommended by the Holy See. Besides, it alone furnishes the means of spreading far the light of the gospel and establishing it solidly in the places we have the responsibility of opening up (Spiritan Rule no. 26) (1849).**

**When, through God's mercy, we have succeeded in training indigenous priests, everyone will treat them with all the respect one gives to (priests of the Lord), everyone will be warmhearted to them and give them encouragement in everything, avoiding airs of haughtiness and anything that, at a distance or from nearby, could smack of indifference or underestimation (Spiritan Rule no. 27) (1849).**

One senses here a vision of mission that is relevant to present-day problems. I will explain by making use of a work that is itself a summary of another work, the excellent book of Jacquement, Jossua and Quelquejeu: 'The Time of Patience'. These authors have demonstrated that two currents run through the New Testament, especially on the level of the Joannine and Pauline writings. A first apostolic current says: 'The Church is going to spread because the missionaries will go to the end of the world to proclaim the gospel'. This is expansion by missionaries passing from place to place, like Paul or those in the Acts of the Apostles. Another current says: 'Evangelization, the propagation of the gospel among the peoples of the earth, is accomplished above all on the basis of witness'. It seems that two concepts of evangelization are being enunciated. In the group of writings, Acts — Letters of St Paul, the dominant line is: an apostle's job is to get from place to place proclaiming the gospel of God, bearing the name of God everywhere, as St Paul did, and journeying ceaselessly to that end.



And I would point out that the Acts insist on the fact that the gospel is proclaimed in this manner, especially to the Jews and the religious world. The second way of presenting the gospel is found in the Joannine writings. The community evangelizes, challenges, questions by its very life and the quality of its witness, especially by what its own fidelity clarifies and reveals of the deepest meaning and impact of the gospel in the human condition as such. Again I would point out that here also the witness is given 'in the face of the world that refuses God'. In this vision, the goal of evangelization is not first to go to the end of the earth to proclaim the gospel, multiplying the people who do the evangelizing, but is of a wholly different order. It is to give rise, at vital points of human history, to Christian communities, so that, as communities, they may be an authentic demonstration of the gospel sign. One thinks spontaneously of the 'cor unum et anima una' of the little groups in Jerusalem or of the 'that they may be one' of St John. It is a matter of witnesses who point people back to the Lord Jesus in as much as his message is one that touches on the human, transfiguring it.

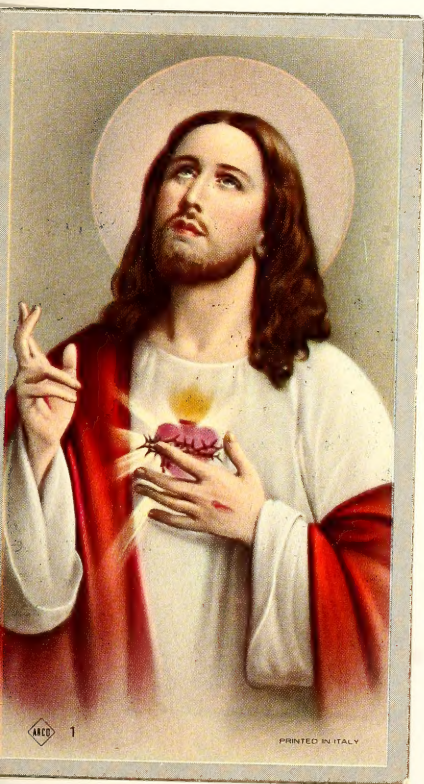
The problem of evangelization by 'sent missionaries' has become crucial in our present world. Moreover, many areas are more and more closed to the entrance of foreign missionaries. And it is clear also that the religious context in which this evangelization can succeed is one fast disappearing, even beyond the European and American west.

The future of mission is in the direction of communities that are in themselves witnesses of the gospel, vibrant communities. On this point again, Libermann, with very sure instinct and simply by his profound knowledge of the gospel context, had the correct outlook when he asked his missionaries to be missionaries by the quality of their lives, the witness of their holiness and the radiating strength of their sanctifying grace; they would give birth in this way to hope among the peoples. Libermann proclaimed in his century what will probably be the law of the future: 'God seems to want us to save this country rather by our sanctification than by our zeal'.

J. M. R. TILLARD, O.P.  
Saint-Pierre et Miquelon, August 1985.







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In Loving Memory of  
BERNARD T. MALONE  
Whom God called to Himself  
December 14, 1985

Father we entrust our brother  
to your mercy.

You loved him greatly in this  
life: now that he is freed from  
all its cares, give him happiness  
and peace for ever.

Welcome him now into paradise  
where there will be no more sor-  
row, no more weeping or pain, but  
only peace and joy with Jesus your  
Son, and the Holy Spirit for ever  
and ever.



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